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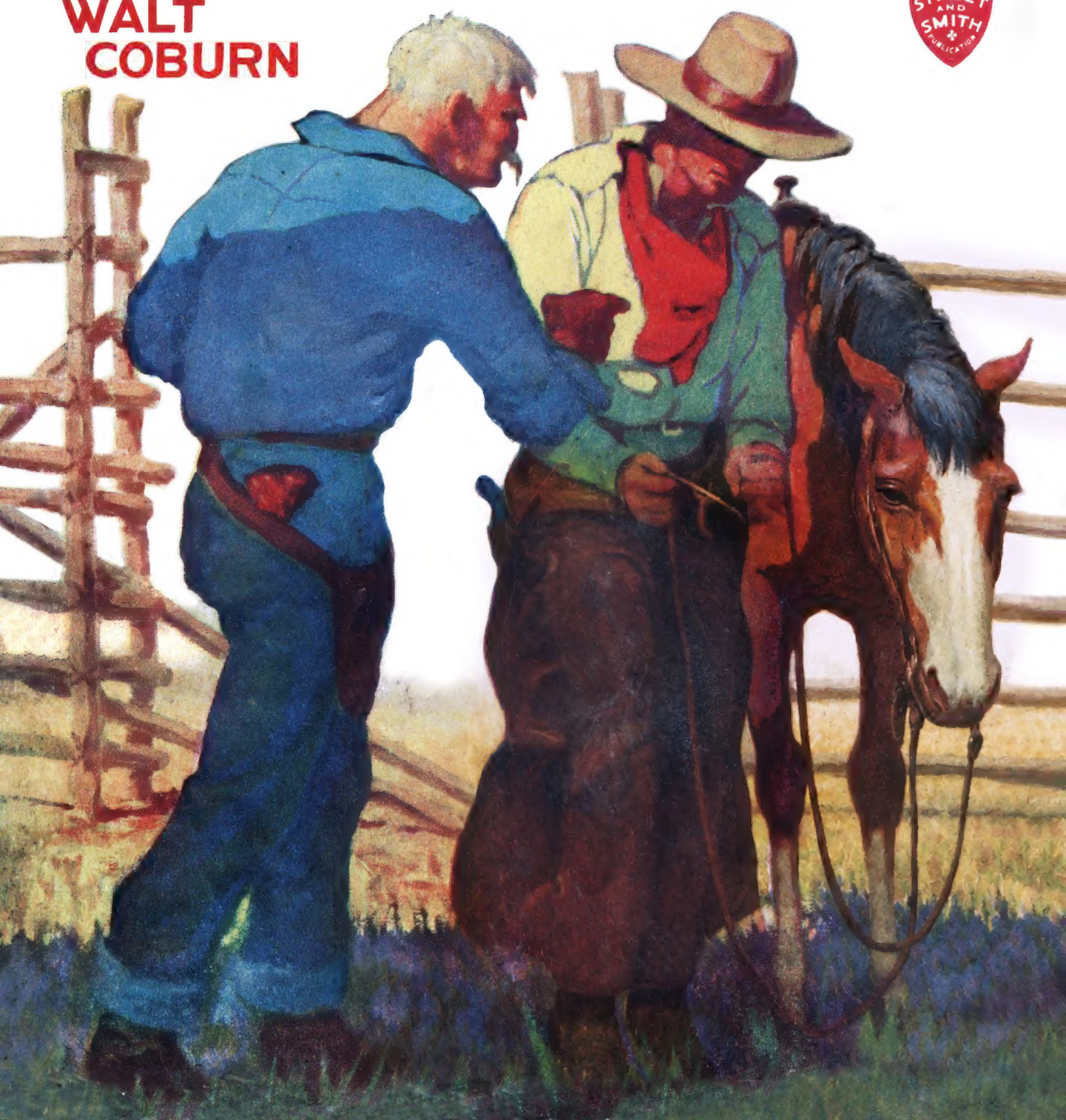

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By Seth Ranger

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By Guthrie Brown

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By John Briggs

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By Paul Ellsworth Triem

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BEAUTY IN DISTRESS

By Christopher B. Booth

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DON'T TRUST THE LADIES!

By Leslie Gordon Barnard

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Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary. Copyright, 1930, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1930, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, September 4, 1917, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Canadian Subscription, $7.50. Foreign, $8.50.

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but when he started to play the piano . . .

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"What's that in your pocket, Dick? Your will?" asked John.

"No, that's just some sheet music I bought on the way over," returned Dick.

"What in Heaven's name are you doing with sheet music? Going to use it as wall-paper?" exclaimed John.

"Why, I'm learning to play the piano. Didn't you know?"

"Oh boy! Listen to that! You couldn't learn to play in a thousand years."

Dick looked at John with an amused smile on his face.

"What would you give to hear me play?" he asked calmly.

"A ten dollar bill if you'll go up there right now and play that piano. What do you say?" exclaimed John with triumph in his voice.

"You're on," replied Dick, quick as a flash. "I'll take you up on that little dare. But not here—wait 'til we get home tonight."

"No, sir, you'll win or lose that bet right now. Come on, fellows, let's take him right up to the piano and we'll settle it here."

"Don't be foolish, boys, you'll only make us the laughing stock of the place," begged one of the girls.

Heedless of Dick's pleading, they dragged him to the platform and placed him at the piano. By this time the unusual goings on had caught the attention of everyone in the restaurant. Now Dick realized that he had to go through with it. So summing up all his courage and with a sudden burst of confidence, he broke into the chorus of the latest Broadway hit.

John gasped. He couldn't believe his ears. Everyone at the table sat in open-mouthed amazement as Dick sat there playing one snappy number after another. It wasn't until the regular orchestra returned that they allowed Dick to rise from the piano. Amid the din of applause, he went back to the table, only to be swamped with questions. But Dick refused to tell them the secret of his new-found musical ability, in spite of all their begging.

Going home that night Dick finally gave in.

"Well, John, I've put one over on you. I learned to play by myself, without a teacher."

"What? That's impossible! Tell me more."

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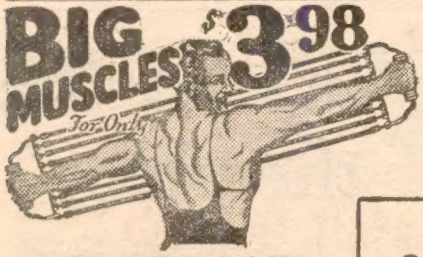

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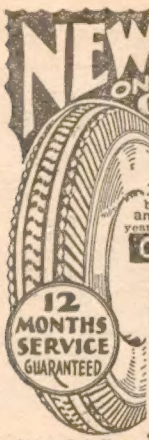

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Valley Squatters

By Walt Coburn

Author of "Wet Cattle," etc.

CHAPTER I.

"YONDERLY."

BEHIND Pete Tondro lay the bad lands flanking the muddy Missouri. Somewhere in those rough, pine-spotted hills the sheriff of Choteau County would be trailing a false track that would eventually lead him to some breed camps down on the river bottomland. A breed hay crew. There, grazing with the breed ponies, the sheriff would find the horse Pete Tondro had ridden out of Chinook the night of his shooting scrape with Asa Hutchinson. But from the half-breeds there he would learn nothing. They were the kind of friends a man needed to know in a tight place.

From a bald ridge, Pete Tondro looked back on the country he was leaving, perhaps never to return. A wild, broken country that would never be farmed. Pete had been born there in those bad lands, had grown up there on the river, had punched cows there, and called it his home. With his field glasses he could almost pick out his little ranch on the north side of the river. He pictured the log cabin and shed he had built there, the log barn, the alfalfa patch, and the little horse pasture below the barn, the homestead that they'd tried so hard to take from him in court. Dang 'em, they'd lost out! Big and influential as was

that Lazy K outfit, their influence had had no weight with that white-haired old judge. And their threats had not put the fear into the river neighbors who went to Helena to testify for Pete Tondro and prove that he had lived up to the letter of the homestead laws of Montana.

The Hutchinson boys owned the Lazy K. Asa, Zack, and Bud Hutchinson. Texans. Gun toters. Ornery. And because they wanted Pete Tondro's place for a winter line camp, they'd set out to somehow get hold of it. Failing in court, they'd tried force. Well, they'd succeeded in running Pete out of the country; but the last glimpse Pete Tondro had of the three Hutchinson boys, Asa was lyin' there in front of the Chinook bar with red spurting from his mouth; Zack was cursing a broken gun arm, and trying to shoot left-handed; while Bud, held at bay by a few of Pete's friends, was vowing to see Pete ketched and hung.

Pete wasn't so sure but what the Lazy K could make things bad for him. He had been the first to jerk his gun, because he figured that that was his only show of ever leaving the place alive. So he'd beat 'em to it. And a jury might not savvy about it. They'd gone at it mighty slick. Come up to Pete with a lyin' lot of talk about buryin' the hatchet. With ten or a dozen Lazy K cowboys there to testify that they'd tried for peace. Then Asa had stepped close, and in a tone so low that none of the crowd heard, he'd muttered his abuse that brought Pete's gun from its holster spewing fire and hot lead.

Now the sheriff and a posse of Lazy K cow-punchers would be scouring the bad lands, following that wrong sign. Pete Tondro's trail ahead would take him out of the country. In another cow country somewhere, and under a new name, he'd try for another little stake. A man's still young at thirty.

The sun was touching the high ridges with its setting light. The mournful howl of a coyote filled the young cow-puncher's heart with sadness. His eyes misted and his jaw muscles quivered. Somehow, it didn't seem right that a big outfit could run an honest man out of his home, make him an outlaw, and steal what was his by right of hard labor and honesty. A few brief days ago he had been a respected citizen. To-day they were hunting him down with guns. It didn't seem right. Pete's straight lips twisted into a crooked, bitter line. Under level black brows his blue eyes hardened. His hand caressed the wooden butt of the carbine under his leg.

"Our way goes yonderly, horse." He patted the neck of the big blue roan gelding and reined him southward along a dim trail.

So Pete Tondro quit his home range and started "yonderly." To find a new name, and a new cow range, and make new friends. And, so fate was to decide, new enemies as vindictive as those he now left behind.

CHAPTER II.

"ARE YOU HENRY BENNER?"

ABOUT a month later, a gray-eyed stranger, riding a gaunt blue roan horse, pulled rein on the rim of Paradise Valley. It was the season of the rain in the Southwest, and the long, wide valley below was a mass of green. Rimmed around by purple hills, it must have looked like this to those early settlers whose covered wagons came across the Indian country. So they had called it Paradise Valley, and settled there to raise their herds of cattle.

For a long moment the rider sat his saddle, drinking in the clean, green beauty of the valley. Then he stepped down and loosened the saddle cinch to ease his weary horse. He unslung his field glasses, and while his horse grazed,

he scanned the valley. He saw cattle grazing down there. A few widely scattered houses. A yellow ribbon of road.

Idly the stranger from his high position watched two men riding side by side along the road. Now they parted and were both lost to sight in the brush.

"Gatherin' strays, most likely. Couple of cowhands earnin' their forty a month and beans. Horse, that looks a heap like the sort of cow country we bin lookin' for since we quit Montana. Water, and grass, and a country big enough so's a man kin spread a loop without snaggin' 'er on a fence post. Yonder goes another rider. Follerin' along behind the other two. Gosh-amighty, he's fell off! He's——"

From far below came the faint echo of two shots fired close together. Then the two riders that had first appeared rode out of the brush and away from the spot where a frightened horse, its saddle so abruptly emptied, sidled away from the man who lay motionless in the road.

"The danged dirty bushwhackers! They shore got their man. Lay in the brush till he come along, then shot him without givin' him any kind of chance."

The stranger got to his feet and tightened his saddle cinch.

"Blue horse, you and me haven't actually got any call to go ridin' down there to where that feller got bushwhacked. It ain't any of our look-in, rightfully speakin'. But we just saw murder done, and mebbeso the gent is not plumb dead, but layin' there wounded where them two skunks left him. Accordin' to what little raisin' I had before I gets orphaned when I'm a button, my daddy always taught me to lend a hand when I could. So we'll go down and horn into what ain't our affair. But mind what I say, blue horse, that blotched brand markin' yore shoulder is just a birthmark. And the name of the driftin' cowhand a-forkin' you is Pete Smith. Pete Smith from nowheres in particular. Let's go."

As he rode down the trail that led into the long valley, Pete told himself that he was all kinds of a fool to horn into this shooting. Back up in Colorado, he had seen, posted on a bulletin in a cow-town post office, a reward notice with a fairly good likeness of Pete Tondro. Asa Hutchinson's brothers were offering ten thousand dollars, dead or alive, for the man who had shot and killed their older brother. And as any man on the dodge will bitterly testify, a man who rides with a big price on his head had better ride careful, because his friends are few.

Suddenly, Pete pulled up. There, on a huge granite boulder alongside the trail, was a notice painted in large, uneven, black lettering.

TO THEM IT CONCERNS.

This is the northeast corner of the Diamond M range. Sheep and nesters keep off. This is a public road according to some fool law. And any man is titled to travel it. But don't turn off to right or left, for any reason. Stay to the middle of the trail and ride as hard as your horse will stand it. No camping or shooting allowed. Every Diamond M man has his orders regarding trespassers, so be guided according.

"Sheep and nesters," grunted Pete. "I never follered a band of woollies in my life, but I reckon I come under that head of nesters. And, blue geldin', I'm wonderin' about that feller that's layin' farther along this Diamond M trail. I'm just wonderin', horse, if that pore feller is likewise a nester or a sheepman. Let's get along our way. And we'll ride with our eyes peeled and our hand near the artillery. Because among the other things Asa Hutchinson called me was a danged nester. And a nester to the smeller of a cowman seems like a skunk."

Pete, an hour later, was squatting beside the dead man in the middle of the trail. The man had been shot twice

through the back. He was dressed after the manner of a cowboy, in overalls, jumper, boots, and chaps. A man of fifty or so, weather-beaten of face, horny-handed, stern of expression. In a worn holster was a cedar-handled .45 that the victim had not been given the chance to draw.

"Just reach for the clouds!" rasped a voice from the brush. "And what I mean is clouds, not a six-shooter. Because, Mister Feller, my gun is cocked and pointed your way, and even if I was a bad shot I couldn't miss at this distance. Stick 'em higher up."

Pete obeyed. That voice meant business. Its unseen owner was not bluffing. And even as Pete stood there, hands held above his head, another voice sang out:

"Just keep your gun on him, Andy, while I look him over for to see has he sheep ticks in his hair."

A short-statured man with a two-week beard, and a .45 in his hand, stepped from the brush near by.

"Now, mister, who the heck are you, and what fetches you here, and just what's your game?"

"I'm a stranger passin' along the trail," said Pete, his eyes hard with anger. "I ain't up to any game. But I found this dead feller, and stepped off my horse to have a look at him. It ain't every day a man runs onto dead corpses."

"Know him, Reb?" asked the hidden man.

"Never laid eyes on him, Andy. He rides a three-quarter-rigged saddle and looks like a dally man. From up North somewheres, I'd reckon."

"Turn him my way so's I can see his face good. Smile nice for Uncle Andy, now. Nope, he ain't the huckleberry we want, Reb. Send him along. I wouldn't mind ownin' that horse of his. Tell him to ride on and keep a-ridin', Rebel."

"Andy," said the grinning Reb, "says you can go. No hard feelin's, cowboy. Only you needed lookin' into. Keep right on down the valley till you hit the town. You'll know it's town because there's a saloon and a store there, and a restaurant. Tell whoever is there around town that somebody better take a wagon and come out after Bill Gallagher. Say to whoever you run into that Rebel and Andy Carr is with Bill's body. They'll savvy. Now, lope along, stranger, and keep to the middle of the road. Because yuh're ridin' acrost Murdo Macklin's Diamond M range, and here of late Murdo has got awful touchy about strangers hangin' around. The last squatter Murdo ketched snoopin' around with a land map and compass, he roped him and like to drug the feller to death. It taken the squatter better'n a week to pick the cactus spines outa his hide. And when he learns Bill Gallagher is dead, he's gonna paw ground. Yeh, I'd stay right to the middle of the road. Mosey on, cowboy."

Pete mounted and rode on. He noticed the dead man's horse was branded Diamond M on the left shoulder. And that two other saddled horses standing behind some brush wore the same brand. Then it was not a trespasser, but one of Murdo Macklin's own men, who had been killed. And two more of the Diamond M men were now there standing guard over the dead man.

Pete rode on in thoughtful silence. There was an uneasy feeling in his mind that he could not shake off. The feeling that he was being watched and that it would indeed be unhealthy to stray from the main trail. But he rolled and lit a smoke and assumed an attitude of carelessness he did not feel. But nothing happened. Shortly past the noon hour he rode into the small settlement of Paradise. A short street flanked by houses that sadly needed painting. A general store next to the saloon with its high, false front and wooden arcade. An unpainted house

labeled "Mike's Café." Half a dozen listless loungers sitting in front of the saloon, whittling, half dozing after their dinner. They glanced at Pete, then exchanged sidelong glances of mute question. Nobody spoke. Pete stepped off his horse and up onto the plank arcade.

"A gent named Bill Gallagher is dead back along the road about twenty miles. A gent named Rebel and another un named Andy Carr is there with the body. They 'lowed you'd better send out a wagon."

A lanky individual, homely of face, with a pair of mustaches that hung dankly down to cover the corners of a wide mouth, rose from where he had been squatting on spurred heels against the wall of the saloon.

"So Bill Gallagher's dead, is he?"

The tall man's eyes, greenish under sun-bleached brows, were cold. The tilt to his battered hat, the way his thumbs hooked into a sagging cartridge belt, the forward hunch of his shoulders, all were indications of aggression.

Pete's eyes narrowed to meet the tall man's searching gaze.

"Dead as a rock."

"Now ain't that jest too—danged—bad!"

Somebody snickered. Pete's face became hot. The loungers were all grinning. The lanky man's jaw shoved forward. An ugly look crept into his eyes.

"Go back to Andy Carr and Reb, and go farther back to Murdo Macklin, and tell 'em for us that there ain't a wagon in town made right to pack the body of Bill Gallagher. Say to Murdo Macklin that, accordin' to our opinion, the world is better off by the cashin' in of Bill Gallagher. He'll make good buzzard bait, and there's no room in the Paradise boothill for such trash. Which same goes for every man a-workin' for the Diamond M. Includin' this gun-th'ower which he's hired up North to bulldoze honest citizens. I reckon, young feller, that you know who I'm talkin' about. If gun-th'owin' is your game, we'd be proud to look at a sample."

"If gun-throwin' was my game, mister," said Pete tensely, "and I was givin' out free samples, you'd get yourn. I don't work for Murdo Macklin of the Diamond M, and my gun ain't for hire to any outfit at any price."

"Next thing we know," leered one of the other men, "the feller will be tellin' us that he ain't from Wyoming. Ask him where does he come from, Clem."

"Tell your friend, Clem," said Pete coldly, never taking his eyes from the lanky hill-billy, "that I come from a country that treats strangers decent. And when a stranger rides up on a leg-weary horse, they ask him to light and give him the best they got, regardless. I heard you call this town Paradise. And the valley is shore well named, but accordin' to what little Bible learnin' that's come my way, this Paradise range is supposed to be a place where there's no snake tracks. I sit up on the rim and, with my glasses, I sees a man bush-whacked in cold blood. I go down to see what can be done for him, and two of the Diamond M riders throws down on me and tell me to ride the middle of the road or I'll get what Bill Gallagher got in the back. They gimme a message to fetch here, which I do, and you treat me like I was a skunk. Who I am, and where I come from, don't happen to be any of your danged business. That goes as she lays, and if she don't lay good, that's too bad all around. There's six-seven of you and there's one of me."

Pete's hand was on his gun. A tight silence gripped the crowd as the lone cow-puncher held the lanky hill-billy in the grip of his gray eyes. Then a slow grin spread across the rugged, homely face of the lanky Clem, and Pete saw a twinkle in the big man's eyes.

"Stranger," he said, "mebbeso us boys done made a mistake. You look straight, and you talk straight, and you didn't back down against odds. Put your hoss in the stable and we'll give you the best we got. We're plain folks, and when we ain't crowded we're peace lovin'. Though it's bin hard to keep from burnin' powder here the past five years. We bin crowded fu'ther and fu'ther. Our stock run off, our boys shot at and abused by Murdo Macklin's hired killers. So when we got word that a killer from the Johnson County war in Wyoming was hired to Macklin, and you show up with that message which was like slappin' us in the face, then she looked like fight. When you say you ain't this Wyoming killer, I don't think you lied. You don't have the look of a liar. If you are Henry Benner, I'd advise you to ride on. But if you ain't Henry Benner, light, and look at your saddle and stay till you're ready to pull out."

"Is Henry Benner the man you took me for?" asked Pete, a peculiar smile on his mouth.

"That's the name of Murdo Macklin's killer."

"I look as much like Henry Benner as you look like Santa Claus."

"You know him?"

"Yes," said Pete, his face hardening with bitter memory, "I know him. I'd like to cut Henry Benner's sign once more. I'd be proud to look down a gun barrel and find Henry Benner on the wrong end of it. Henry Benner is the gun fanner that killed my dad."

CHAPTER III.

DUST IN HIS EYES.

THESE hard-bitten men of Paradise were a friendly lot, Pete found, once they'd been convinced that he was not one of Murdo Macklin's men. And as they lined up at the bar, the lanky Clem Carter gave the young stranger in Paradise a vivid and bitter story of the valley.

"We come here about the same time Murdo Macklin moved his herd up from the Staked Plains in Texas. We come first, just half a dozen families that come over the Santa Fe trail and located here. Things down in our part of Texas had got too hot fer the small cowman. We come here. And we ain't hardly located till Murdo Macklin trails his herd in. With him comes his men. Men who had been in the Texas range war that pushed us on here. And when we'd found this valley and called it Paradise Valley, we shore meant it. Our wimmenfolks and kids could breathe free and sleep of a night, without fear of night riders. We planted corn and made gardens, built houses and corrals, and turned our little herds loose on a range that was shore purty. And we was beginnin' to let the dust gather on our guns when Murdo Macklin throwed ten thousand head of longhorns down the valley. He begun to push us out. Our fences was cut, Diamond M steers hazed acrost our corn patches, our cattle run off.

"Murdo Macklin has no wife nor daughters to depend on him for protection. He ain't got but one tie in the world, and that's his son Harvey. And if some of our boys has much luck, Murdo won't have Harvey much longer."

Clem Carter's eyes hardened. A silence fell over the men at the bar. The man next to Clem laid a hand on the lanky fellow's arm.

"Don't think about that business, Clem. It'll spoil your appetite for this good corn likker. Remember, Clem, it ain't never been proved about Harvey."

"I know what I know," growled Clem, "and I know that Harvey Macklin was a-ridin' a gray hoss that night when he come down the valley. And the old lady says it was a cowboy on a

gray hoss that stole away my li'l' daughter Hattie, like a danged coward in the night. I know she went willin' and that she'll never come back, even if I was to let 'er. She was stuck on his fancy ways, I reckon. And she's a-layin' in the bed of her own makin'."

Clem Carter's brooding eyes stared from under twisted brows. His big hand gripped the long-barreled Colt in its low-hung scabbard.

From outside came the thud of shod hoofs, the chiming of spur rowels, and the swish of cowhide chaps. Now a tall cowboy with freckled face, sandy hair, and laughing blue eyes swaggered into the little saloon.

"Howdy, men. What's makin' you all look so glum? I got some news that'll drive away your sorrow. Bill Gallagher's dead."

"Tell us somethin' we don't know, 'Jerky.' Your news is as old as granny's cow."

"This news peddler," grinned Clem Carter, roused from his brooding mood, "is the no-account Jerky Hyatt. Jerky, shake hands with Pete Smith from Montana. Jerky is the 'John Law' of Paradise Valley, only he never gets much to do because them as has troubles settles 'em in their own way. Jerky is the only man that's allowed to set foot on Murdo Macklin's land. A good cowhand was plumb spoilt when they pinned that star on Jerky Hyatt's shirt. All he does now is go a-girlin'."

The young sheriff of Paradise held out a freckled hand. But his smile was not so cordial as he shook hands with Pete.

"Are you the cowboy that Andy Carr and Reb told me about stoppin'?" he asked, his eyes searching Pete's face.

"I'm him. Why?" Pete sensed that the sheriff was looking him over in a none-too-friendly light.

"Nothin', Smith. Only, don't leave town till me and you have had a private talk."

"We can talk here and now," said Pete, nettled by the silent suspicion in the law officer's manner.

"What I've got to say," said the sheriff meaningly, "is better said in private."

"Heck, Jerky," grinned Clem Carter, "a man 'u'd think you was goin' to arrest him. And what'll we use for a jail?"

"A pair of handcuffs, Clem, if I need 'em."

For a moment Pete's heart felt the chill hand of fear. Not the physical fear of this freckled young sheriff, but fear of what stood behind that star pinned to his flannel shirt. Fear of the heavy hand of law that shuts human beings in steel cages. Law that hangs a man by the neck until he is dead. The law that was reaching myriad arms out to put steel handcuffs on men and bring them out of the sunshine into the eternal shadow of a prison cell.

Eye to eye with the law for the first time since he had quit Chinook with his horse on a run, Pete Tondro, now Pete Smith, tried not to flinch. He forced a grim smile.

"Let's get 'er over with, sheriff. Whatever kind of a powwow you want, let's step outside and get 'er done and over."

The freckled sheriff nodded. "Not a bad idea, stranger. Lead the way, I'll foller behind."

"If I was bad, mister," said Pete flatly, "and I wanted to shoot me a sheriff, I'd do it from in front, not behind. But from the contact I've had with law officers, they like to have the bulge. So foller me from behind if it'll ease your mind any."

Pete walked out the door and onto the street. He waited at the hitch rack, where Jerky Hyatt had left his horse, a splendidly built mahogany bay.

"Nice horse you ride, sheriff."

"Best in this part of the cow country."

"Diamond M brand on him."

"Yeh. Harvey Macklin gave him to me last year."

"Yeh?"

"Yeh."

"Harvey Macklin is Murdo Macklin's son, ain't he? And Murdo Macklin owns the Diamond M. And, like in every other country where the big cow spreads are, the Diamond M owns the law."

"Yuh're talkin' mighty bold for a man with a price on his head, Mister Pete Tondro."

"That's the kind of talk I'm used to, sheriff. And you got my name right. I figgered that was what you wanted to talk over. So when I walked out ahead of you, I located a little pocket gun in my overalls pocket. My hand is in that pocket now, and it's holdin' that .38 gun. The gun is pointed so's it 'u'd send a bullet into you before you could begin to get your cannon into action. Now, sheriff, with that in mind, just what is your general plan of action?"

"My plan of action," said the sheriff slowly, "is just exactly the same in every detail as it was when I started. If I was a scalp hunter, Tondro, I'd have shot you when I went into the saloon. Or when I follered you out here. And so I reckon you'll agree with me that holdin' onto that gun in your pocket is just a little silly."

"Mebbeso, but for the present, I'll just keep on a-holdin' it. Just what's on your mind, anyhow?"

"I want to know just how much you know about a danged cold-blooded murder that was done this mornin'. Where was you when Bill Gallagher was killed?"

"I was sittin' up on the rim with a pair of field glasses. I just happened to see it done."

"You'd know the murderers if you saw 'em again?"

"No. They were too far off. But one of 'em rode a light-colored horse, buckskin or gray, and his pardner rode a black."

"Hmmm. Did the gent on the black horse wear a black hat?"

"Now that I think of it, his hat did look dark-colored. I couldn't say for sure."

"Andy Carr and Reb was there in the brush when you come along?"

"They was, for a fact. And they send me in here with a fool message that like to got me into a jam. But somehow I don't think it was them that killed this Gallagher."

"Just what makes you think they didn't?"

"Just a kind of hunch. They just didn't act like they'd killed him, somehow. And they was both ridin' bay horses."

Jerky Hyatt nodded. "I'm kinda proud of the fact that I've always give every man I went after a fair break. At the same time, I've kept the oath I taken when they made me sheriff of Paradise. I've played no favorites in the war between Macklin and these folks here at Paradise. Murdo Macklin knows it, and Clem Carter knows it. There's a lot to be said on both sides, for that matter. But I've played her on the square, and every man in this valley knows it. And I'll play square with you, if you'll do the same by me.

"Trouble's about to pop here in Paradise Valley. I can't stop it, and no other man can stop it. It's been five years a-comin' to a head. It'll be another Lincoln County war, another Jackson County and Tonto Basin gun feud, sure as fate. This murder of Bill Gallagher has opened the jack pot. There's some talk that Murdo Macklin has hired Henry Benner and Benner's gang of outlaws from the Black Hole country to do his killin'. I didn't grab it at first, but now I'm beginnin' to think there's somethin' in it. Murdo

Macklin is goin' to lay this killin' onto Clem Carter's oldest boy, Tommy. Tommy and another cow-puncher from the lower valley had gone up on the Diamond M range to fetch back some stray stuff. They camped on the rim last night. And it was Tommy Carter that Andy Carr and Rebel was layin' for when you come along. I come along behind you, and I fetched Tommy with me. Likewise, I fetched Harvey Macklin. I knowed, you see, that that Tommy wasn't really huntin' strays, but had gone to kill Harvey. Well, I got the two of 'em to calm down and was a-fetchin' 'em to town when we run onto Reb and Andy, there where Bill Gallagher's body was layin'. She looked tight for a few minutes, but I talked 'em out of it. I sent Harvey home to the main ranch and fetched Tommy along to town. He's over at the barn now, waitin' for us. And he's goin' to pilot you to a trail that'll take to where I think Henry Benner and his gang are hidin' out. You'll throw in with the gang and keep me posted on things. You'll let me know when they figger on any deal. And in return for said favors, you'll be Pete Smith here in Paradise. Get me?"

"I reckon I do. I can hire out as your stool pigeon or I can consider myself under arrest."

"Somethin' like that, Tondro."

Pete had taken his hand out of his pocket and now was pouring tobacco from a muslin sack into a brown paper. Suddenly he flipped the loose tobacco into the sheriff's eyes. His right fist swung in a short arc. The sheriff dropped. The next minute Pete had vaulted into the sheriff's saddle and was spurring away, lying low on the bay's neck.

Jerky Hyatt, with a quick oath, jerked his gun. But he did not shoot. As the men came running out of the saloon, the sheriff yelled at them.

"Hold everything, boys! Don't shoot! You might hit that horse, and he's worth ten of such as that cuss a-ridin' him."

"What happened, Jerky?" asked Clem Carter.

"Nothin' much," came the bitter reply; "only I thought I was makin' a wise dicker with the son of a gun, and he outguessed me."

Rubbing his jaw, Jerky Hyatt strode to the saloon door. From his pocket he took a printed paper and some tacks. His six-shooter for a hammer, he tacked up the paper.

Then men who stood watching him read:

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD!

For the capture, dead or alive, of Pete Tondro.

Below was Pete's picture and his general description.

"You knowed him, Jerky?"

"Had him spotted this mornin' when he rode past a place below the rim where I happened to be hidin'. There where Murdo painted his notice on the rock. And I thought I'd figgered out somethin' cute. Clem, take a walk with me down to the barn. Tommy's waitin' there. Dang, that Tondro cuss can hit! Slick, too. Ever get tobacco in your eyes, Clem?"

"Now and then." Clem Carter grinned widely. "I kinda like that Pete feller, Jerky. He's got a lot of grit."

"And brains," growled the sheepish-looking sheriff.

"Goin' after him, Jerky?"

"Think any man can do what he done and get away with it? I'll hang his ten-thousand-dollar pelt on the fence for what he done."

Clem Carter stared for a moment at the reward poster, shaking his head slowly.

"Much as I like to see a young rooster like you get ahead, Jerky, I can't somehow wish you much luck."

CHAPTER IV.

PETE MAKES TWO FRIENDS.

BY sundown the sheriff's big bay horse had carried Pete Tondro out of the valley and into the mountains to the south. Pete knew that he was not more than forty miles from the Mexican border. Forty miles to safety. To Mexico, the cowman's promised land!

"We'll lay out to-night somewheres, bay horse. Then, before sunup, when day is a-crackin' open the sky, we'll slip into Mexico. When we get to it, we'll slip back into Paradise and set that fool sheriff afoot again. He'll be ridin' the smartest blue roan geldin' that ever packed a man faithful. I ain't a-scared to let him use Blue for a spell. By the way he's kept you in such good shape, he's a horseman. And for all his tin star, he ain't such a bad gent."

Pete's musings were suddenly broken off by a shot that kicked dust in the trail ahead. Another shot sizzed past Pete's head. Jerking his six-shooter, Pete jumped the frightened bay horse into the brush. Two men hidden there leaped to their feet, shooting. But Pete had jumped the bay almost on top of them. One of the two went down, struck by the bay's plunging hoofs. Pete's gun cracked, and the second man dropped his gun with a snarling curse, his arm broken by Pete's bullet.

"Now," said Pete hotly, "you two bushwhackin' sons, will you give a man some idee what's your object in tryin' to kill me off?"

"The population of this valley is jest nacherally overcrowded," sneered the man who had been knocked down. "We was sent out by the gover'ment to cut her down to the right measurements."

"I've always wanted a close look at one of these human snakes that would hire out to kill folks. Well, I'm lookin' at two, and I can't say that either of you is much of a sight. You're just two half-baked, fuzzy-lipped kids with shaky hands, and no sense to speak of. You'd shore like to be tough, but don't know how. You go out and buy some guns and start out to be tough. Now, make another smart-Aleck crack and I'll knock your heads together some. Speak up and talk fast. Who hires you to shoot folks from the brush?"

"Murdo Macklin."

"That's a danged lie. And I don't like liars. Talk the truth." Pete's gun roared and one of the two yelped and grabbed his ear.

"It stood out so, I just couldn't resist," grinned Pete. "Now, spit out the truth."

"A man at White Barn give us a hundred apiece and set us here to guard this trail. We don't know who he was. That's the truth. We was to scare back anybody that come along. We never meant to kill you. We been workin' for the Diamond M, but was let out."

"What kind of a lookin' gent was this feller that hired you?"

"A big, handsome, swell-dressed feller with white hair and a black mustache. The bartender at the White Barn told us he was Henry Benner, Murdo's new foreman. We never asked no questions."

"Where is this White Barn, and what is it?"

"It used to be a stage station. Now it's a road house. It's about two miles from here at the foot of Corona Pass, over the mountains. This is the trail to it."

"Well, let's take a look at it. You two buttons need patchin' up. And I'd like a drink or two and some grub. Let's ramble."

The two cowed bushwhackers got their horses, and Pete, gun in hand, herded them up the trail. It was dusk when they reached the White Barn. A dozen horses stood at a long hitch rack in front of a rambling adobe. Two or three men sat around on the veranda.

From the lighted interior came the sounds of revelry. A fiddle and an accordion were going. There was the scrape of feet on the board floor. Men's voices and the chatter of women. Some one was calling off a square dance.

"Do si do! Ladies to the center and all hands round!"

Pete motioned to the two wounded men to dismount. He did likewise, and followed them up on the veranda. The men sitting there eyed him and the sullen bushwhackers with indifferent grins. It was as if they were used to seeing men hurt. Pete grinned thinly and accosted a man who lurched through the doorway.

"Is Henry Benner inside?"

"Henry? I'll tell a man! He's swingin' them high, wide, and handsome. Drunker'n a hoot owl and ugly as a wolf with pups."

Pete pushed the two wounded men inside ahead of him. The dance had just ended, and Henry Benner, a girl on each arm, swaggered toward the bar.

Tall, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted. Dressed in the height of cowboy fashion. A tall-crowned black beaver hat rested on a thick mop of curly, snow-white hair. His skin was suntanned to a swarthy brown. Black brows; a trim black mustache; a cold, white-fanged smile; and black eyes that were opaque and hard as black agate. His shirt was soft, white flannel, laced with black buckskin down the front. His "California pants" were grayish plaid with buckskin foxing. Fancy boots with high heels. Silver spurs. An ornate gun belt, and holster tied low on his thigh, so that his hand brushed the ivory butt of the Colt .45.

His intoxication was apparent only in the hint of pallor under his swarthiness and the insulting twist to his handsome mouth. His restless black eyes fastened on Pete and the two wounded men. With an insolent abruptness, Henry Benner, gunman and range killer, thrust aside the two girls and strode forward.

"What the heck's this?" he snapped.

"These two boys tried to throw a scare into me back yonder a ways. I fetched 'em here. Are you Henry Benner?"

"I am. And this is my private party. I don't recall having invited you. In fact, I don't recall ever having seen you until now."

"I didn't aim to horn in," said Pete evenly, his eyes studying the face of this notorious killer. "But I come a long ways and I could use a drink and some grub. I aimed to stay over at Paradise, but I gets into a fuss with the sheriff there. I come off without eatin'."

"What's your name?"

"Pete Smith is the name I give out at Paradise."

"You work for Murdo Macklin?"

"I'm forkin' a Diamond M horse."

"And how come you got in bad with the sheriff there?"

"He happened to know who I was and where I come from. And he put me a proposition that if I'd throw in with you and play stool pigeon, he wouldn't arrest me and send me back to Montana to face a charge of murder. I didn't care much for the idea of bein' a stool pigeon. So I left Paradise in a rush. I'd figgered to go on across Corona Pass into Mexico when your two bushwhackers balled up their job. That's about all there is to it."

"So you're Mexico bound? What do you expect to do down there?"

"Punch cows. Build me up a little spread of some kind."

"Yeh? Handle some 'wet cattle,' perhaps?"

"If there's enough money in it to make her pay," grinned Pete.

"Well," said Henry Benner flatly, "there's dang little in it unless you belong down there. The local boys have a corner on that graft. You say Jerky

Hyatt wanted you to ride with me as a stool pigeon. Hmmmm. And you say you turned him down?"

"I knocked him down and took his horse. That's the Diamond M horse that packed me here. I left a better horse back in the barn at Paradise. Aim to swap back some night."

"I'm to believe all this you're telling me?"

"Not unless you want to," replied Pete. "Take it or leave it. If this is private, and I ain't welcome, I'll be on my way. I only aimed to deliver you the two clumsy gents that shot at me and missed."

"You know who I am?"

"Henry Benner from Wyoming," replied Pete. "I've heard a-plenty about you, and I recollect seein' you once when I was a kid. Up in Montana. Ain't that the same gun you packed then?"

Henry Benner seemed somewhat flattered by this remembrance. He smiled and shook his head. "Same white handles. The gun wore out, and I've had two since. But I always transfer the handles, just for luck." He called the bartender.

"Give Pete Smith what he wants to drink and have the cook rustle him some grub in the kitchen. Smith is just passing through on his way to Mexico or somewhere. I'll take more warm bourbon for mine, Jake."

Henry Benner put his arm around a pouting girl and pulled her alongside him.

"Little lady, you see this cowboy? He just shot two of my men. Those two over there getting patched up. Now there arises a point of social etiquette. Am I, as host of this blow-out, to treat him as a guest or not? True, my men were clumsy. They should have shot him or let him come along unmolested. And because of their bad marksmanship, I owe this gentleman an apology of some sort. So I will invite him to be one of our merry little party. Henry Benner fulfills his duties as the genial host.

"But on the other hand, little lady, I deduce from his manner of speaking that he comes from the North. Montana or Wyoming. In those States, understand, I am somewhat unpopular. I have many enemies up there. So, when a man from those Northern States meets up with me, I cannot help but feel somewhat uneasy. And there is something vaguely familiar about the handsome face of our young cowboy. I'm wondering if his trail and mine have ever crossed, and under just what circumstances. But I am fond of solving puzzles in my own way. That's why I don't ask him any questions. I'm more intrigued by the idea of waiting until the puzzle works itself out. How do you like the idea, little lady?"

"Listen, what kinda game ya playin', anyhow? All them big words means nothing to me," replied the girl sullenly.

"Smith, the young lady does not appreciate us," said Benner. He smiled at Pete over the rim of his filled glass. Here's to you, stranger. To our enemies. May their bullets be soft, their aim bad, their hearts brave! I always hate to kill a coward."

"Here's the same to you, Henry Benner."

They drank. Then Benner whirled the girl away to the tune of a waltz, and Pete was left standing there alone at the bar, a stranger apart from the crowd that eyed him with indifferent and unfriendly glances.

Pete Tondro knew that if he stayed here, Henry Benner would perhaps force a quarrel. There had been a sinister challenge in his talk of playing host to a stranger from Montana. Montana or Wyoming, where Henry Benner dared not set foot for fear of being hung by the honest ranchers! Pete Tondro resembled the dead father who had been killed by Henry Benner up in

Montana when Pete was a kid, and it was that resemblance to the dead man that now puzzled the killer whose guns had spilled blood from the Rio Grande to the Canadian line. At any moment Benner might remember. He would know that Pete Tondro was not the breed of man who let his father's death go unavenged. And Pete wondered with grim amusement just how Henry Benner would open the play.

"When he does open the jack pot," mused Pete, toying with his empty glass, "he'll have a good hand. His hand will be filled with the bone handle of that gun of his, and it'll be spittin'."

Now, Henry Benner, with a crooked grin, handed his dancing partner into the arms of a member of his band. Pete saw him step into a hallway that doubtless led to a row of rooms. And above the blatant din, Pete thought he heard the muffled sobbing of a woman. The sobbing came from down that hallway.

Pete's musing abruptly ended. There was a pound of hoofs on the veranda, and the next instant a cowboy rode into the place. Pete saw a tense, square-jawed face twisted with hate. There was a gun in the cowboy's hand, and his slitted eyes swept the room, searching for some one. There was something terribly tragic in that hate-filled, handsome face. Even as there was splendor, and romance, and a gay recklessness in the silver-mounted saddle and bridle, the big silver spurs, the cream-colored Stetson that slanted at just the right angle on the black head.

"Gosh!" whispered a girl behind Pete. "It's Harvey Macklin, and he's crazy drunk!"

"Where's Henry Benner?" croaked young Macklin, sitting his restive horse with splendid ease. "Speak up, you, where is he? If he's a man, he'll come out in the open and fight!"

A sudden scream from some hysterical woman made young Macklin's horse jump. The shod hoofs lost footing on the smooth boards. The next moment horse and rider were floundering on the floor. The gun had been wrenched from Harvey Macklin's hand. The horse scrambled to its feet. Harvey Macklin stood up, livid with rage, empty-handed. Just as Henry Benner came in the front door, his white-handled gun in his hand.

"Did I hear somebody asking for me?" he asked in a voice that was deadly cold. His slitted black eyes were fixed on young Macklin. His gun covered the white-faced young cowboy who stood there, one unarmed man against the armed killer and his mob of drunken outlaws. There was murder in Henry Benner's face. Cold, calculating murder.

Pete slipped through the crowd unnoticed, until he stood behind Benner, almost within arm's reach.

"You came here to fight, did you? No man ever came to Henry Benner for a fight and left disappointed. Pick up your gun, you young fool, and I'll accommodate you. Pick it up!"

"Don't!" screamed a woman's voice. The next moment a girl in disheveled riding clothes came running from the hall, her golden hair, bobbed short, and curly, tangled above her pale face.

"Don't, Harvey! He'll kill you!"

"Keep out of this, Hattie," croaked Harvey Macklin, limping painfully toward his gun that lay on the floor. "Keep back, girl."

But the girl would have rushed into the center of the cleared floor had not a couple of men grabbed her and held her back. Harvey Macklin, his face white and tense, was almost to his gun.

Henry Benner, leaning a little forward on widespread legs, stood waiting, a sneer on his lips.

With a catlike spring, Pete was on him. Pete's gun barrel thudded across Benner's head. With a look of blank surprise on his face, the killer dropped

like a felled beef. Pete Tondro, standing over the unconscious gunman, covered the startled crowd with his gun.

"The first one of you skunks that moves, I'll commence shootin'. Macklin, get your gun. Pronto! Turn loose the lady, you two."

Harvey Macklin snatched up his gun. The crowd fell back.

"Lady," said Pete to the girl, who had jerked free and stood there, white-faced but calm enough, "take that horse and ride him outside. Ride down the road a piece and wait. Me and Harvey Macklin will be along directly."

Obediently the girl swung into the saddle with the ease of an expert rider. She rode through the sullen crowd and out through the door. Side by side, Pete Tondro and Harvey Macklin started backing out.

But with their leader there on the floor, dead or unconscious, the band had no appetite for fighting. Once outside, Pete and Harvey Macklin made their way to the hitch rack. Pete swung up on the big bay. Macklin mounted the first horse he came to. The next moment they were racing down the dark road.

"I don't know who you are," said Harvey Macklin, "or where you come from, but, pardner, you're a man."

"I never been taken for anything else, yet," chuckled Pete. "Yonder's the lady, waitin'."

Pete pretended to be looking the other way when Harvey and the girl leaned from their saddles for a quick embrace. All three were riding at a reckless pace down the road, back toward Paradise.

"That fiend told me that you were at the White Barn, hurt, Harvey," said the girl. So I went along with him. When I got there he told me he'd lied. They locked me in a room there."

"Dang 'em all!" cried young Macklin. "I got to camp and you were gone. Followed the tracks of your horse and Benner's. Then I ran onto Andy Carr and Reb, and scared some of the truth out of 'em. Reb knew where we've been hidin' and tipped dad off. And dad hired that Benner snake to kidnap you. I don't ever want to see my father again. We'll quit this cursed valley and make a home somewhere. But we can't get out for a while yet. They've got every trail watched on account of this fool range war. We'll have to locate a new camp, honey."

"Yes." The girl held her hand out to Pete. "Harvey and I will never be able to thank you for what you did to-night. Benner would have killed him. Harvey and I ran away and got married. His father and mine hate one another. That about explains it all. We have no home or money or friends. Only each other. And all we can offer you is our friendship and gratitude."

"What did you think I'd want besides that? Shucks, forget it. I was right glad to do it."

"You're one of Henry Benner's men?" asked Harvey.

"Lordy, no. I just dropped in there because I was born a plumb bonehead. And I was in a tight place myself when you rode in. Henry Benner had just figgered out the answer to a puzzle he was workin' out, I reckon. And he was fixin' to spell me out the answer in bullets. He'd snuk out the back way and was comin' around front to su'prise me when in comes you and the show opened. You see, unless I hit him harder than I aimed to, me and Henry Benner is due to lock horns some day. And when we do, I hope to have better luck than my daddy had twenty years ago when Henry Benner shot him down in his own doorway."

"You came here to get him?"

"You mean here to Paradise Valley? No. I didn't know Benner was in the country. They said he'd gone to Mexico. No, I come here to find a little piece of land and raise a few cows. I was huntin' a peaceful country. And I

run into worse than I'd left behind me. A sure-enough hornets' nest of trouble. I'm as bad off as you folks are, mebbe worse, because the sheriff don't like me."

"Ain't that Jerky's horse you're ridin'?" asked Harvey.

"It shore is," chuckled Pete. "I kinda swapped with the sheriff."

"Jerky Hyatt is our best friend," said Harvey. "True blue and game as they make 'em. He stood up with us when we got married. I'm right sorry you and Jerky didn't hit it off good. And if you stole that horse, he won't quit till he finds you."

"I left him a better one. And I'd shore love to swap back if I could. We better quit this main trail, hadn't we?"

"I'll tell a man we'd better. Let's swing off to the north and up into the hills. I know a place where they'll never look for us. Tired, Hattie?"

"If I was, I wouldn't say so."

"It ain't far. Hattie's about the bravest girl that ever lived, mister. She went against her dad and her brothers to marry me. Her mother wished us luck. But her dad and Tommy and Dode shore did paw the earth. The Carters are shore good haters."

"How about Murdo Macklin?" smiled Hattie.

"We ain't goin' to mention Murdo Macklin's name ever again, honey."

"Don't say that, Harvey. He'd do anything to hold you. You're the only thing in the world he cares about. And, after all, we can't blame our folks too much. They're so bitter against one another. Don't be too hard, dear, on any of them. After all, that Benner brute didn't hurt me. His orders were to treat me decently. My kidnaping was just a club to get you back home. I wouldn't have been harmed."

"I don't reckon," put in Pete, "that Murdo Macklin knows just what kind of a man he's hired when he got Henry Benner. It's a good thing, lady, that you got out of that place. And Murdo Macklin is goin' to wish before long that he'd never heard of Henry Benner. He'd double cross his own brother. That's the kind of a man Henry Benner is. He should be tromped out like a man would tromp out a snake.

"I'd say Benner's already started in. It was him and one of his men that killed that Bill Gallagher gent. Murdo Macklin thinks it was Tommy Carter. Yep, that snake has done started in to spread his poison. He's after the Diamond M outfit and unless he's tromped out, he'll likely get it in the end. And no matter how hard a man the folks think Murdo Macklin is, they'll think he was a plumb Christian gent compared with Henry Benner. That's what Murdo Macklin and every man in the valley is up against. This valley will need every man in it before long. They better lay aside their quarrel and go after Henry Benner and his band. Or this valley will run red."

"Our friend is right, Harvey," said Hattie. "If only our people could be made to see it! This valley is our home. Paradise Valley, dear. And no matter where we'd go or what we'd find for a new range, it would never be like this wonderful old valley. And if we leave it now, as we plan to leave it, breaking the hearts of our folks, we'll never find happiness or contentment. Harvey, I'm going home. And you're going back to your dad to help him fight this Henry Benner. When our folks come to their senses, they'll know we've done nothing wrong and will be ready to forgive us. And if God will answer my prayers, some day Murdo Macklin and Clem Carter will shake hands. Harvey, dear, it's our only hope of gaining the happiness we need. Can't you see, dear?"

"Not right now I can't, old pardner, but I see that you'll never be happy until you try this idea out. But I won't go back to the Diamond M Ranch."

"You'll let that stubborn old cattle-

man be robbed, perhaps murdered, Harvey? Down in your heart you love him as much as he loves you. And you'll go back and fight for him, Harvey Macklin, or I'll never be able to be proud of you."

Harvey Macklin looked with miserable appeal from the girl to Pete.

"She's right, Harvey. Mostly, I don't take much stock in what women say. But once in a long time you run acrost a woman that's level-headed and thinks straight. And when you do, listen careful, because it's a thousand-to-one shot that she's dead right. Ma'am, you got enough horse sense for both sides of the family. And if Harvey will ride on to his dad's place and shake hands, and bury the hatchet, I'll take the lady home to her folks at Paradise. Now, I'll ride on a piece while you two tell one another good-by for a few days. And when Mis' Macklin ketches up, her and me will mosey on into Paradise, and everything will be hunky-dory."

"I've never thought to ask your name," said Harvey Macklin.

"Pete Tondro."

"Pete, if ever there comes a day when you need a friend, I hope I'm there to fill the bill. I'll do like you say. Shake."

They gripped hands. Then Pete rode on a little way, whistling softly.

"Bay horse," he said softly, "do you reckon there's just one more girl in Paradise Valley like that little lady? And do you reckon she'd ever look twicet at a no-account, bone-headed cowboy about my build and complexion? But shucks, even if we was that lucky, bay pony, I couldn't ask her. We like to forgot, there for a minute, that our back trail ain't clear. Nope, horse, it ain't in the cards. We'll take the lady back to Paradise, and I'll swap you back for the blue horse that fetched me here, and him and me will drift on yonderly. Providin' your gosh-blamed owner don't ketch me makin' the swap."

CHAPTER V.

"YOU'RE A WHITE MAN!"

A SINGLE light burned in the home of Clem Carter. That light was a lamp set in the window of the little bedroom that had been Hattie's. As Hattie and Pete pulled up, there were tears in the girl's eyes.

"Mother is waiting for me, Pete. Dad will sulk for a while, but not for long. Tommy and Dode will cuss a little and throw big fits and little uns. But sis will stick by me, bless her! She understands, even if she never has been in love. Pete, it's good to go home. And you've made it possible. You're —— Gee, you're a white man!" And before Pete knew it, he was kissed heartily on a face that was rough with dusty stubble.

"Gosh!" he grunted, red as an Indian blanket. Hattie laughed softly and gripped his hand.

"Sure you can square things with Jerky, Pete?"

"Plumb positive, ma'am."

"You didn't really steal his horse. Just borrowed it. Jerky's a dandy fellow when you know him better."

"Yes'm." Pete looked around uneasily. "I'll be siftin' along now. Good luck to you both." And he rode down toward the big feed barn, leading Harvey's horse that Hattie had ridden to town.

Pete slipped into the black interior of the barn. He turned the two horses into the feed corral and cautiously looked around for his own horse.

"Blue horse! Blue, you biscuit-eatin' son of a gun, are you here? Where are you, pard?" he called softly in the darkness. A soft nose nudged him. With a low cry of joy, Pete put an arm across his blue horse's neck and pulled the soft nose against his cheek. For some minutes he stood there in the darkness, whispering a lot of fool nonsense into a fuzzy ear.

"Nary a biscuit for you, pardner. Gosh, I ain't had a mouthful of grub in so long that I'm ga'nt as a dogie in the spring after a hard winter. And right down yonder street is a eatin' place, too. But it'll be crackin' dawn in a half hour, and we got ground to cover. We're Mexico bound, blue horse, just me and you."

"Ain't you some optimistic, Tondro?" came a voice from the barn door.

"Heck," cried Pete, "it's the law feller! And he's got us dead to rights."

"There's a lantern near where you stand, Tondro. I got you sky-lighted. Light it. I knowed you'd come back for that horse, so I waited here."

"Did you take good care of him, Mister Law?"

"Better than you took of mine."

"I rode him no harder than I could help." Pete lit the lantern and unbuckled his gun belt.

"Here you are, Mister Hyatt."

"Drop it on the ground, Tondro. Then shed that pocket gun."

Pete grinned and tossed a .38 down with the holstered .45.

"How about a feed, sheriff? I can't recollect when I grazed last."

"I could stand some grub, myself," admitted Jerky Hyatt. "Walk ahead with the lantern. No tricks, either. I ain't forgot that crack in the jaw."

"That bust on the jaw," explained Pete carefully, "was one of them unfortunate things that comes into every man's life. I never meant to hurt you, and I can't say I was exactly hot under the collar. Even if you did call the wrong card when you sized me up as a man that'd play stool pigeon. But I shore ain't bothered with no desires to see the inside of a jail house, and when you called my name, I kinda got panicky. If they convict me up in Montana, I'll get a long term, mebbe be hung. So you can see why I might get kinda panicky at the idee of bein' arrested."

They walked down the street to the little restaurant. Except for a red-faced woman of ample weight who was fussing over the stove, the place was empty. She looked at them with a motherly smile.

"Ye got the poor lad, didn't ye, Jerky? He looks half starved, bless his heart! Comin' back for his horse, he was, and him wid a price on his head! There's times, Jerky Hyatt, that I don't hold wid yer cold-blooded law methods. Sit down, lad, and take the weight off yer legs. And old Biddy will rassle ye the best bait av ham and eggs ye ever throwed a lip over. The java's just comin' to a boil. And there's flapjacks av sour dough wid a jar av me own jam av which Jerky Hyatt gets not so much as a smell. For Biddy Maloney holds wid no such laws as hounds such b'ys as this. Pastin' his picture up for the world to look at, blackguardin' his name wid big letters, puttin' a bounty on his hide so that these no-account fellers will hunt him down like a coyote. Bad cess to ye. Jerky Hyatt, and I've a mind to let ye go hungry! Here, Pete lad, is a cup av java that'll make ye fergit yer troubles. 'Tis the second poor hungry b'y I've fed this mornin'. Faith, an' didn't I weep into the flapjacks at the sight av him! And the thoughts av her, poor thing, a-comin' home."

Jerky Hyatt nodded. "He's a good boy, Biddy. And Hattie's one in a million. Ain't I tried the last ten years to beat Harvey's time?" He turned to Pete and grinned.

"Harvey beat you here, Tondro. Said he was scared you was runnin' into a mess by fetchin' Hattie home. So he risked the chance of bein' shot by the Carters to come here and tell me that if I harmed you, he would shore take it up. Here's your gun, Tondro. I got enough to do here in this valley without pinchin' every suspicious character that shows up."

"I ain't under arrest?"

"Nobody but Biddy knows I ketched you to-night, and there ain't enough kinds of torture made to get the news outa her."

"The mischief take ye, Jerky Hyatt, and yer everlastin' plaguin' a pore woman! Why didn't ye say at the start that ye wasn't harmin' the b'y? Have ye nothin' better to do than to put gray hairs in the head av a hard-workin' woman? God bless ye both, here's yer flapjacks! Pete, lad, when ye've helped yerself to the jam, will ye kindly pass it along to the sheriff?"

"Yes, ma'am. Sheriff, you shore are treatin' me white. I'd like to return the favor."

"I can give you that chance, Pete. How'd you like to work with me for a spell? Harvey told me what you'd done there at the White Barn. And how you talked him into goin' home, which was more than I could persuade the young broncho to do. Harvey told me what you said about Henry Benner, which same is my slant on the situation. You can see what I'm up against here. And I'd be proud to have your help."

"Ain't you forgettin' I'm wanted up in Montana?"

"Nope. What you done up there concerns the Montana sheriff. You've acted like a man here, and Paradise is willin' to take you as such. Don't think you're the only gent in Paradise who come here under a new name. When I got hot and tacked up that notice, I shore got into it with the boys. They ripped it down and rawhided heck outa me. Said I'd run off a good citizen. Clem told me that Henry Benner had killed your daddy. Still, you wouldn't stool pigeon on him. And, mister, when Paradise hears how you got Hattie Carter outa the White Barn, they're goin' to shore be proud to shake your hand. For we all think a heap of Hattie. Heaven help the sheriff that ever tries to lay a hand on you here in Paradise! So, if you want to stay and take the chances of bein' killed, us folks at Paradise will be mighty proud to take you in among us."

"I'll be mighty glad to stay, sheriff. I'm into her now, and I'd like to go through."

"And now the two av ye tie into that grub," beamed Biddy, "or I'll throw it away."

"Good idea," grinned Jerky. "Pete and me has a long ride to make. We're goin' over to the Diamond M Ranch to have a medicine talk with Murdo Macklin."

"If ye're meetin' that auld man, ye'll need a full meal. And mind, Jerky, don't let the b'y get hurt."

"From what I've seen and heard, Biddy, Pete can take care of hisself."

They were finishing breakfast when Clem Carter burst in the door. His lean, homely face was twisted with anger. His big fist crashed on the table.

"She's back! She come back as she left her good home, in the night. Sick of her bargain already, she comes sneakin' back! And when I tell her that it ain't her home no more, I'm danged if the old lady and June don't side in with her and tell me they'll all go if Hattie goes. Wimmen these days is gettin' so they all want to wear the overalls. Gimme some ham and eggs, Biddy. I'll not eat in a house where the wimmenfolks boss a man."

"Ye'll eat to home, Clem Carter, or ye'll go hungry!" snapped Biddy, and Jerky winked at Pete.

"How's that?" gasped Clem Carter.

"Ye heard me plain. Not a mouthful av grub will ye get here. How two such lovely colleens as Hattie and June can stomach the likes av such an auld man, I dunno. And poor Norah Carter a-puttin' up wid yer tobaccy chawin', and yer whisky guzzlin', and yer dirty boots a-trackin' the cleanest floor in Paradise, 'tis beyond me. And her

cookin'! And the way them two girls has amounted to somethin' in spite o' ye! Shame on ye, Clem Carter! And there's the hole in the wall that the carpenter made fer a doorway. Use it! Or I'll scald yer back wid water. Ham and eggs, is it? 'Tis a bath ye're gettin', and little harm 'twill do ye, ayther!"

Clem Carter retreated hastily before the broad approach of the irate Biddy Maloney with a steaming kettle in her red hand. Out the door and down the street to the saloon Clem made his profane retreat.

"The language that man uses," panted the returning Biddy, "is a disgrace to Paradise. I've knowed but one equal, and that was poor Mike Maloney, dead these five years. And Mike had an excuse, him bein' a bullwhacker. Mark ye, Clem'll eat home or he'll eat no place."

But when Jerky and Pete reached the saloon, they found Clem breakfasting on whisky, crackers, stale cheese, and canned tomatoes. He glared at Pete and Jerky, who passed him by without a word. The saloon keeper hid a grin behind a broad hand.

"What'll it be, boys? Glad to see you back, Pete. Name your poison."

"We'll just take along a pint with us," said Jerky, "in case of snake bite. When Tommy Carter and Dode show up, tell 'em I said to stay here till I get back. Pete's my new deputy, and we're goin' out on a *pasear* over on the Diamond M range. If I ketch any of the Paradise squatters on Murdo Macklin's range, they'll be pinched. From now on there's goin' to be some law in Paradise Valley."

Clem Carter snorted. "I'll ride where I dang please, young feller."

"Goin' after Harvey Macklin?"

"And I'll kill him where I find the young whelp!"

"You're all in a stew, Clem. Cool down and look at this thing sensible. Do you think that I'd side with Harvey if I didn't think he was good enough for Hattie? I think as much of her as you do. More, by gosh! Because I want to see her happy. While you are doin' everything you can to spoil the girl's life. Harvey Macklin is a good boy."

"He's Murdo Macklin's son!" roared Clem, his great fist pounding the table, upsetting his can of tomatoes and the bottle of whisky.

"Do you think that Hattie is anywhere proud of the fact that Clem Carter is her dad?" snapped Jerky. "You're actin' like you were loco. And if I had a jail, you'd go in it right now. I'm the law here in this valley, Clem. And I've deputized Pete to help me enforce that law. Directly we get back from the Diamond M Ranch, we're organizin' a vigilance committee to wipe out the Henry Benner crowd. And I want you and every other man in the valley to back my play. If you don't, then Pete and me quit right here and now. Pete's just come from the White Barn, and the Benner crew is there on a big drunk. Benner had Hattie there a prisoner, and Harvey Macklin come near bein' killed tryin' to rescue her. Only for Pete, Harvey would have got killed, and Hattie would be there at that skunk's mercy."

"My gosh, Jerky, you ain't lyin' to me? That's the truth? My little Hattie young un there at the White Barn?"

"And if anything had happened to her, Clem, you could have blamed nobody but yourself. Thank Pete Tondro that she's home safe. Pete fetched her home last night. And when you've thanked Pete, go on home to breakfast. Go home and tell Hattie what a stubborn old mule-headed loon you've been."

"And be henpecked the rest of my days!" growled Clem, grinning wryly. "Pete, if you saved that baby of mine, there ain't any words I know that can

thank you. But here's the hand of a cranky old hill-billy. It's a hand that'll fight for you, son."

When Clem Carter had gone, Jerky heaved a sigh of relief. "That's handled. Get at Clem the right way, and he'll listen to reason. Murdo Macklin's the hard-crusted old wart hog that'll give us trouble. Well, let's get goin', Pete. It's broad daylight."

When Jerky Hyatt and Pete Tondro rode down the dusty street past the Carter place, Hattie waved to them from the veranda. Beside her stood a smaller girl with dark-brown hair, who also waved to them. And as Pete waved his hat, his heart pounded against his ribs with a fast thud.

"If you get back in time," called Hattie, "you're coming to chicken supper. Both of you! Dad's on his second stack of cakes!"

CHAPTER VI.

SNAKES IN PARADISE.

A COLUMN of white smoke rose against the sunrise. Jerky and Pete spurred up. Jerky pointed ahead of them.

"That the Barrows place. Old Joe Barrows and his pardner, 'Deafy' Jones, squatted there. Murdo's never been able to run 'em out. Looks to me, Pete, like it was afire."

Half an hour later they pulled up at the smoldering black timbers of what had been the little homestead. Not a soul was in sight. A ten-minute search among the hot ashes revealed the charred bodies of the two homesteaders. One of the grisly-looking skulls was half torn away.

"Shotgun," said Jerky grimly, "and at close range. Both the old boys murdered, Pete, and the place set afire. Look careful for sign."

For an hour they searched in vain. Then, near where the barn had stood, Jerky picked up a small pocket notebook such as cowmen use to tally brands. He looked through it carefully, then pocketed it.

"That's Andy Carr's tally book. Not much evidence to put in front of a jury, Pete. Not enough to get a conviction. But it's enough for me to know who done this murder. There's his fresh sign, Pete, made in the ashes. And if Andy was here, then Reb was with him. Them two never travel separate."

Jerky Hyatt mounted his horse. "I reckon we'll find our murderers at the Diamond M Ranch. Let's go."

It was nearing noon when they pulled up at the Diamond M Ranch. Half a dozen sheds and barns, a main house of Mexican structure, with a long arcade in front. Corrals and a branding chute. An adobe bunk house of similar architecture as Murdo's house.

A dozen riders sat their horses. A cowboy was unhooking a team hitched to a spring wagon. A short-statured, bow-legged man with white whiskers stood talking to Harvey Macklin. Nobody spoke as Pete and the sheriff rode up. Pete spotted Andy Carr and a man he took to be Rebel, sitting their horses a little apart from the other cow-punchers.

"About time you showed up here, Hyatt. We got tired o' waitin' and planted Bill Gallagher. Murder's been done, and the two Carter boys done it. And by heck, you'll do your duty or I'll know why you don't! Bill was shot in the back. Are you goin' to serve these bench warrants I had made out, or are you scared of Clem Carter? Hey? Are you?"

"I aim to do my duty as sheriff, Murdo," said Jerky quietly, "and unless I get downed a-tryin' I'll get the two men that killed Bill Gallagher. There's no need to get your shirt tail in a knot about it."

"Who's that man with you? What's he doin' here?"

"He's the man that kept your hired gun fighter from killin' me," said Har-

vey Macklin, "when I went to the White Barn."

"You had no business a-goin' to the White Barn," snapped the bristling old cowman. "I've give you orders to stay clear of that place. Girl crazy, that's what's wrong with you! Whisky, and cards, and such. A fine thing for any respectable cowman to face in his old age! You, the only kin I got to hand down the Diamond M brand to, and you a gambler and a drunkard! You come home with a fool tale about—— Dang it, I can't talk about it without boilin' over! A fine cock-and-bull story. That girl's got the wool pulled acrost your eyes!"

Harvey smiled wearily and shrugged. "I told you how it would be, Jerky. He won't listen to reason. He thinks Henry Benner is right and I'm wrong. He's grievin' over a cow thief like Bill Gallagher and forgettin' he has a son."

"Bill Gallagher done what I told him. What have you ever done that could make me feel proud that you was my son?"

"I've tried to go straight instead of bein' a thief, if that counts for anything. I won't rob even for my father. And I won't give your hired hands the satisfaction of seein' us stand here and quarrel. I came back here to stick by you, and I'll do it. And when I cut Henry Benner's sign, I'll settle my debt with him. Get down, Jerky. Light, Pete. Dinner's about ready. Paw's on the prod, but he'll get over it when he's had a drink and some grub."

Harvey laid a hand on his father's shoulder and grinned down at the crotchety old cowman.

"Let's call this off. There's just you and me left. Don't let's forget what we both promised the little mother before she was laid away up there on the hill."

Murdo Macklin shook free of his son's hand and, turning away, walked toward the house, his spurs chiming dolefully, his white whiskers sagging on his thick chest. Harvey looked after him with a hurt look in his eyes. Then he forced a grin.

"Step down, boys, and we'll tie on the feed bags. Didn't expect to see you two ridin' together. But it's a sight for weak eyes." He turned to the cowpunchers.

"Put up your horses, cowhands. Reb, take Jerky's horse and Pete's to the barn. And when you look for that jug you cached in the grain box, you'll find it gone. It's the last time I'll tell any of you about fetchin' whisky on this ranch. What drinkin' there is to be done around here, me and the old gent will do it. The next jug or bottle I find, I'll bust over its owner's head and send him down the road talkin' to hisself."

Reb and Andy Carr traded meaning glances as they headed for the barn, leading the horses belonging to Jerky and Pete.

"They're bad medicine, Harvey," said the sheriff.

Harvey nodded. "The old gent shore has a hankerin' for pickin' up snakes." He led the way to a small adobe cabin and ushered Pete and Jerky inside. From a cupboard he took a bottle of whisky and glasses.

"Tie into it, gents. I can't join you. It's been two months now, Jerky, since I gargled any tarant'lar juice. Shows what a woman can do with a man. She shore knocked my horns off."

"Well, they could stand plenty knockin', Harvey." Jerky grinned at Pete.

"Pete, this rooster shore could liven up a quiet gatherment of solemn folks when he was lit. Over the mountains at San Salvador, where we always go for our gay times, them Mexican folks think Harvey is the grandest gent that ever bucked his horse down the street. We usta ride over there for the big fiestas. He'd walk off with all the rodeo prizes, dance the fandango with

the purtiest girls, and eat dinner with the mayor, while us common scrubs chawed chili beans with the peons. It's too bad that them days are all over for Harvey, now that he's tied to Hattie's apron strings. No more guitar playin' and dancin' with the señoritas. Fiesta time, when me, and Pete, and Tommy Carter, and Dode, rides over to San Salvador to rope, an' ride, an' dog the steer, an' h'ist a few light uns, an' swing the señoritas aroun', you'll be holdin' Hattie's knittin' yarn. You'll have on a apron an'——"

The next moment Harvey and Jerky were rolling over and over in each other's tight grip, punching, and twisting, and grunting. Pete watched the good-natured scuffle with a wide grin. It had been a long time since he had been company to such rough comradeship. And finally, when Jerky had Harvey's shoulders pinned to the floor, the sheriff's grin took Pete into the fraternity.

"Lemme up, bonehead," grunted Harvey.

"Are you licked?"

"I'm down, ain't I?"

"I'd orter finish him, Pete. Darn his hide, he married my girl! I mighta had a chance, but this fancy cuss cuts me out, and then they got the nerve to make me stand up while they get married. Now I'm on the prowl for another girl. I done proposed to June twicet now, but she says she ain't takin' any man till she's looked over a few more. And while I'm keepin' all strange cowboys outa the valley, this danged Pete shows up on the scenery. Harvey, if I let you up, will you lend me a hand in wipin' out this Pete gent?"

"I'll help you wipe out anybody if you'll ease your weight off my briskit."

The next moment Pete found himself on the floor, pinned down hand and foot. Jerky's weight bounced up and down on his stomach, while Harvey gave him a dry shampoo.

"This kinda evens up that crack in the jaw, outlaw," panted Jerky. "Got a-plenty?"

"Enough for the present, you danged double-rigged sons."

"Let him up, Harvey. And let this be a warnin' to him."

Pete got to his feet, grinning, and gasping for breath. As he drank with the sheriff while Harvey lifted a glass of water, something like a hard lump inside Pete's heart suddenly melted.

And Pete Tondro knew that no matter what might happen before this range war was done, he had found here in Paradise Valley that which he had reckoned as forever lost. He had found comradeship of men. He was no longer an outcast.

As they stood there, a shadow crossed the threshold, then passed on. It was the shadow of Andy Carr. Behind him swaggered Reb. They glanced inside the cabin, then moved on. Once more the sunlight filled the doorway, but to all three men inside that mellow light had lost something of its warmth.

"I'm takin' them two snakes back to Paradise," said the sheriff, "on a murder charge. They'll hang for the murder of old Joe Barrow and 'Deafy' Jones."

"There's never been a Diamond M man convicted of anything yet, Jerky," said Harvey Macklin dubiously.

"I haven't much evidence this time," sail Jerky quietly, "but I reckon Andy Carr and Reb will pay, just the same."

"The old gent will raise heck if you arrest 'em here," frowned Harvey. "He'll go hog wild."

"I'll leave here with my prisoners just the same." There was a quiet finality in the sheriff's tone. "If possible, I'll leave here with both of 'em alive. But I can't guarantee that they'll get to Paradise in that condition. Savvy?"

"This will be one trial that the old gent's money can't fix. I savvy."

CHAPTER VII.

TRAPPED!

THE noonday meal was over at the Diamond M Ranch. Murdo Macklin, from his chair at the head of the long mess table, was still in a black mood. His cold, gray eyes, peering from under heavy white brows, kept watching Sheriff Hyatt. The sheriff, Harvey, and Pete sat side by side on the long bench, and their position was near the door.

"Murdo," said Jerky Hyatt abruptly, during a lull in the table talk, "I reckon you wonder what fetched me here. Well, I come for two reasons. The first reason is this—and while the law is a-talkin' you Diamond M men had better listen careful—the first reason is this: I'm warnin' every man in the valley that from now on, I'll handle the law in Paradise Valley, and I'll handle it without the orders or the suggestions of any man. I'll play no favorites, and when I go out to arrest a man, I'll take him regardless of who he is or where he is. Henry Benner and his band have come into the valley. I'm aimin' to run 'em out. And I will run 'em out. Them as don't run will be planted where they drop.

"Murdo, there ain't a-goin' to be any range war in Paradise Valley. What belongs to you will be yourn. And what belongs to the smaller outfits will be theirs. You and Clem Carter have both been wrong, and you have both been right. And you'll settle your differences like men instead of fools. And what there is to settle will be settled without the help of outlaws like Henry Benner. I'm organizin' a vigilante committee that will act in a sane and fair way. I'm ridding this valley of every gun-totin' killer. I'm invitin' you to join, Murdo."

"And I'll tell you my answer in three words, young feller. I come into this valley before you was dry behind the ears. What I got, I fought for, and I'm beholden to no man. You talk like a psalm-singin' preacher. My answer is this: Go to thunder!"

A laugh went around the table. The young sheriff's eyes hardened as he pushed back his chair.

"We'll get along without you, Murdo. I was givin' you the chance to act like a human being for once. But I mighta knowed it was no use."

Slowly, deliberately, Jerky Hyatt drew his gun. Pete did likewise.

"Got your man covered, Pete?" asked the sheriff.

"If I pull the trigger, the Reb gent will get a slug in the briskit," Pete grinned crookedly.

"And if Andy Carr takes his hands off the table, he'll die where he's a-settin'," finished the sheriff grimly.

"What in heck do you think you're gettin' away with?" growled Murdo Macklin.

"A murder was done last night, Murdo," gritted Jerky, "and me and my deputy are makin' a little pinch. We got the two murderers covered, and if any man in this room makes a move to interfere, we'll kill the two skunks where they sit. The law has come to Paradise Valley, Murdo Macklin. You'll see it send two murderers into eternity if you or any man here moves to interfere. Andy, you and Reb get up and step outside. You're both goin' with me to Paradise."

"This is a danged frame-up," snarled Reb. "Do somethin', Murdo."

Murdo Macklin sat slumped in his chair, his eyes glittering.

"There's nothin' to do, boys. He means what he says. Go on with him. I'll foller you to town and get you free. Do as he says."

In sullen silence Andy Carr and Reb got to their feet and slouched out of the mess house. Pete, Harvey, and the sheriff followed the two outside.

"Go on to the barn, you two," or-

dered Jerky, "and we'll foller. Get your horses. I'm lettin' you keep your guns because I'm hopin' you'll show grit enough to put up a fight. In which case me and Pete will kill you. Whenever you think the sign is right, commence. Now git yore horses."

There at the barn, Pete and Jerky kept an eye on the two prisoners while Harvey brought out their horses.

"You better stay here, Harvey. Pete and me will ride herd on the prisoners. If Murdo starts for town, you come with him."

Riding behind the two prisoners, Pete and the sheriff passed the house where old Murdo Macklin stood on his bowed legs, watching them with brooding, bitter eyes as they rode away.

"Pete," said Jerky in a tone that carried to the two riders ahead, as they rode along the road to town, "better slip that pint of whisky to the prisoners. It'll give 'em courage for what's ahead of 'em."

"We got our own bottle, dang you!" snarled Andy Carr.

"Better start hittin' it, then. It'll be your last."

"The heck it won't!"

"The heck it will! And enjoy the sunlight, because you won't be seein' another un."

Reb turned quickly in his saddle. "What do you mean, Hyatt?" he excitedly rasped.

"Nothin', Reb, nothin'. Just kinda runnin' off at the head. Andy, let's have a look at your tally book."

"Uh? Tally book? What do you want to look at my—— Heck, I've lost it!"

"Yeh?" The sheriff's tone was deadly quiet now. They had come to a place along the trail where the big gray boulders rose like granite walls on either side of the road.

"Yeh, you lost it, Andy. And I found it. Guess where I found it, Andy?"

"I don't give a hang where you found it."

"But you're shore a-wonderin' some, Andy. You lost it some time before daylight this mornin', that's why."

"That's a dang lie, Hyatt. I lost it two-three days ago."

"Sure about that, Andy?"

"I'd swear to it on a stack of Bibles."

"Then ain't it kinda odd that under the date of yesterday you got tallied three mavericks you and Reb branded below the Barrows place? That was in the afternoon, I reckon. Come dusk, you and Reb rode over to the Barrows place. The old man was in the kitchen cookin' supper. Deafy Jones was out at the barn. One of you kills old man Barrows through the window. The other murders pore ol' Deafy. You drag Deafy's body into the kitchen and you set fire to the ranch. You're both of you guilty as sin and you'll swing for it."

"You can't cut her, Hyatt. It takes more than that dang tally book to hang us."

"It might," admitted the sheriff quietly, "if your case went before some jury that Murdo Macklin had done bought up. But you're to be tried by the vigilante committee made up of the citizens of Paradise. Murdo Macklin's day here in the valley is done. Just like you and Reb are done, Andy. Ever see a man strung up to a tree limb? There ain't any trap to spring that'll break his neck. He just hangs there, kickin' and twistin', chokin' for breath till his face gets black. And after a while he's dead. While we're ridin' along, you an' Reb had orter match to see who goes first. That is, of course, unless you feel like tryin' to make a get-away from me and Pete. In which case everything will be done and over mighty pronto."

"You'd shoot us down without a chance, dang you!" snarled Reb.

"You'll get more of a chance than

you give pore old Barrows and Deafy Jones. But you'll die. Both of you will die."

Reb pulled up, a crafty gleam in his slitted eyes. "Treat me and Andy right, and we'll treat you right. We was hired to do that job. We only done what we got paid to do. Now that things is a-breakin' bad, me and Andy will do some talkin—that is, if you'll give us a decent dog's chance. How about it, sheriff?"

"You're more yellow than I thought you was, Reb. Take your medicine! Why don't you grab your guns and fight?"

"And be shot down before we could jerk a trigger? Guess again, sheriff. You claim you want to bring law to Paradise Valley. Keep me and Andy from hangin', give us a chance to quit the country and never come back, and we'll give you the whole plan that Henry Benner has got figgered out. It's Benner that hired us. It was Benner that croaked Bill Gallagher because Bill wouldn't double cross Murdo Macklin. Benner and a gent they call 'Missouri' laid for Gallagher. Benner promised me and Andy a-plenty if we'd swear it was Tommy and Dode Carter that done it. We was to swear we seen 'em do the killin'. That was what we told Murdo. Henry's ribbin' up this range, sabe? And now, if you want the rest of the dope, treat us right and you'll get it."

"If we knowed what Benner was plannin', Pete," said Jerky, "we could get busy. I reckon we'll give these two snakes a chance to talk. I'll want it in writin'."

"You'll get it in writin' if you treat me and Andy right. We can take you to the place where we was to report today. There'll be more orders cached there, tellin' us what to do. There's pen and ink at the cabin. Let me and my pardner ride away from that cabin after we got it all wrote out, and you'll never see us nor hear of us no more. Because once we squeal on Benner, we gotta hit a high lope for a far-off range."

"Show us to the cabin, then," snapped Jerky.

"You'll give us our chance, sheriff?"

"Yes. But don't ever let me sight either of you again, because I'll shoot you on sight."

"That," leered Andy, "is jake with us, Mister Sheriff."

They rode on in silence. Andy Carr and Reb took them over a trackless course that led into the hills. Pete Tondro rode with his weight in one stirrup, his eyes on the two murderers. Jerky seemed deep in thought.

Up through the junipers and along a trail that twisted through chapparal and manzanita thickets. Into a clearing where stood a tumble-down adobe cabin, behind it a round corral.

Bluejays scolded. Somewhere a quail called. Then the sun-drenched silence was shattered completely by the crack of rifles.

"Trapped!" snarled Jerky, jumping his horse into the brush. Pete was right behind him. Bullets clipped the brush, and the two trapped men were now fighting desperately against unknown odds. Andy and Reb had swung abruptly into the brush.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LONE WOLF GROWING OLD.

THE place seemed alive with men. Reb's raucous shouting. Shots that shivered the leaves on the brush. Pete and Jerky, leading their horses through the tangle, trying to get away.

Now a man moved in the brush, up ahead. Jerky's gun spat and the man crashed headlong, then lay still. Some one was yelling confused orders. Andy Carr was roaring his defiance.

"Tough spot, Pete."

"Kinda tight, Jerky."

"Hurt any?"

"Skin on my leg got nicked. How are you?"

"Hide whole and madder'n heck. Them two snakes trimmed us, pard."

"I'll tell a man. Get that son there. Never mind, I got him." Pete's gun roared, and a man groaned. White puffs of gun smoke spotted the brush. Side by side, shoulder to shoulder, Pete Tondro and Jerky Hyatt fought their way through the brush. Only to be blocked by a withering gunfire that sent them back to cover.

"We're in for it, Pete."

"Looks that a way, Jerky."

"But we ain't licked, cowboy."

"Licked? We ain't begun to commence, Jerky."

They talked in low tones that were blotted out by the din of rifle fire. Andy Carr and Reb had led them into a trap. They had less than a remote chance to get out alive. Jerky's horse was down, hard hit. The sheriff turned to Pete.

"He's sufferin', Pete. He's packed me many a mile. You'll——"

Pete nodded. He stepped to the side of the wounded horse and held his six-shooter close to the splendid head. A muffled crack.

Jerky's eyes were tear filled, and dry sobs choked him. Pete turned away until the sound of the broken sobbing ceased. They fought on in grim desperation.

"Better give up!! called Reb's exultant voice. Jerky's gun spewed fire. Six shots in rapid succession rattled from the sheriff's .45. Reb's smothered cursing told that at least one of the slugs had hit its mark.

Crawling now, on all fours. Sometimes lying prone on the ground. Their guns belching flame, the recoil of the heavy-calibered weapons jerking their wrists. Carbine and six-shooter. Any man's fight till the last cartridge is gone. All in the game. All part of a day's work. Dust choking dry throats, and the sun beating down out of a cloudless sky. Powder smoke. Crimson staining the ground. Bloodshot eyes and brush-raked faces. Hands that shake from the exhaustion of nerves pulled taut as fiddle strings. Fighting, cussing, mebbe prayin' some if a man had time to recall some bit of lost prayer that he'd known in childhood. Two men against a dozen, there in the brush. That was the way Pete Tondro and Jerky Hyatt fought there in the afternoon. A smear of red on Pete's overalls showed where a bullet had bit into his flesh. Jerky's left arm was bandaged with a bit of rag now deeply red. Still they fought on, two against big odds.

A wild cowboy yell. Harvey Macklin's voice. Murdo Macklin's shouted orders.

"Stand your hand!" roared Murdo Macklin.

Now the firing ceased. The thud of shod hoofs told of the flight of Benner's men. Harvey, shoving cartridges into his six-shooter, rode into the clearing. Behind him came Murdo Macklin and three or four Diamond M cowboys. Murdo crowded his horse past Harvey's. There was a grim smile on the old range baron's bearded lips.

"Yuh didn't get to Paradise, Jerky, with your two prisoners."

"No." Jerky wiped the dirt and grime from his face. "We'll have to wait a while before we take 'em in. But in a few days or a few weeks we'll gather 'em in again, and when we do, Andy Carr and Reb will hang. Am I supposed to be thankin' you for savin' my life?"

"That lays with you, young feller. High and almighty, ain't you? But you're young, and the young roosters crow the loudest. I knowed you'd never take Reb and Andy to Paradise. They are purty slick gents. The horse laugh is on you, Sheriff Hyatt."

"You knowed them two skunks would fetch us here, Murdo?"

"I knowed they wasn't goin' to be hung, Jerky. You're on the Diamond M range yet. And what I own I stand over. I'm the law on my own range. It might do you a heap of a lot of good to remember that. You nor nobody like you can come onto my range and tell me what to do. Now, take your deputy and get to heck outa here. Stay in Paradise with your squatter friends. Eat their grub and foller their orders. And don't ever set foot on my land again."

"Murdo, I wouldn't step a foot on your land only that my duty as a peace officer forces me to. But whenever the law sends me here, I'm a-comin', and you can't stop me."

"I'm the law here on the Diamond M range," snapped the old cattle baron. "The only law. Get off my land!"

Jerky grinned stubbornly. "Not till my job here is done. Andy Carr and Reb killed old man Barrows and Deafy Jones last night, and burned down the buildings. They was hired to do it. They confessed as much. And whenever you try to keep me from arrestin' them two murderers, you're interfering with the law. You're makin' yourself a party to the crime of murder. If you was a young man, I'd give you the dangdest lickin' a man ever got. There in the brush lays my dead horse. He was worth ten of your clumsy cowhands. Now, I'm trailin' Andy Carr and Reb till I get 'em. If their sign leads me to the Diamond M Ranch, there's where I'll foller 'em. And you'll not stop me, Murdo."

The old cattleman's face was gray with anger, but he said no more. Harvey led his father away and started him for home.

"The old gent is takin' it hard," Harvey said to Pete and Jerky when Murdo had ridden away. "It's the first time he's ever been crossed like this. It's a center shot."

"Murdo has his good points, Harvey. I feel sorry for the old rascal. He'll fight till he drops, and he'll never holler for mercy. You can't help but admire a man that has grit like he's got. But his day as king of the valley is gone. I've been lookin' up land titles the past few months, and some of his claimed range is open for homestead filing. And when we've run Henry Benner and his band outa the country, when I've got shut of some of Murdo's cow thieves and gun toters, that land will be filed on. Later, if Murdo wants it, he can buy it legal from the homesteaders."

"Don't be too hard on the little old gent, Jerky," said Harvey. "It's hard for these old-time cowmen to see the free range go. They fought hard to get what they've held all these years. They can't savvy new laws and barbwire fences. True enough, he stole land, and he run a whizzer on the little ranchers, pushin' 'em back off his end of the valley. If squatters file on his land, it'll just about smash him. And no matter what he is or what he's done, he's my father. And I'll stand by him, Jerky, even if it's against you. He hasn't a friend in the world. You just seen him ride off alone. That's what he is, boys, just alone. A lone wolf that's gettin' old. Pete, you talked me into goin' back home. I found him there in his room at the ranch, all by hisself. He had an old tintype of my mother and him, and me as a baby. He was sittin' there lookin' at it, tears tricklin' down his cheeks. He looked mighty pitiful and tired out and old. If she had lived, he mighta been different. But she died one night because the doctor couldn't get there in time. The doctor was a squatter, the same as Clem Carter, and was at a dance at Clem's place when the cowboy paw sent found him. It was stormy as heck, and this doctor was scared to tackle the storm. He wouldn't leave there till daylight. And daylight was too late.

It was then that paw turned so bitter. And when you see his side, it's hard to blame him too much. He just rode away alone. I'll be joinin' him. And as long as he needs me, I'll stand by him. So long, boys."

"So long, Harvey."

They saw him catch up with his father. Saw the two Macklins ride stirrup to stirrup toward home.

CHAPTER IX.

STRUNG UP.

FIFTEEN miles of drift fence cut between every post. A five-strand fence ruined. It was Murdo Macklin's new drift fence. That was at daylight. The score of riders armed with wire cutters faded into the dawn. And just about noon of that same day, a riderless horse came down the main street of Paradise.

Sweat streaked, leg weary, bridle reins knotted and dropped over the saddle horn. There was dried blood on the saddle. It was Dode Carter's horse.

Clem Carter, standing in the doorway of the saloon, was the first to see the horse. He stepped out in the street and stopped the animal. There was something terrible in his calm as he went back into the saloon. Tommy Carter, sitting in a stud game, looked up at his father, who stood there. The dozen men in the saloon looked in startled silence at the lanky Clem.

"I reckon," he said in a dead sort of tone, "that we can't wait for Jerky and Pete to come back. And there ain't no use a-waitin' for my boy Dode. Because Dode is dead, boys. I reckon the Diamond M killers ketched him on Murdo Macklin's range. He'd gone to hunt some horses that had strayed. His horse just come in. There was blood on the empty saddle. I reckon it is about time we carried this fight to Murdo Macklin. Let's go!"

Tommy Carter's face was white as chalk as he pushed back his chair.

"We'll go, dad. And we'll go plumb to the end. If Dode is dead, then Murdo Macklin and his son will pay their debts."

There was little haste or bluster as the men of Paradise saddled up. Winchesters slid into saddle boots. Six-shooters sagged on their flanks. Brass cartridges gleamed in the sunlight as strong fingers shoved their belt loops full. Two abreast, the grim cavalcade rode out of town. Not a single man remained in Paradise. They were all in that crowd that rode in a column along the road that led to the Diamond M Ranch. The men of Paradise were carrying the fight to Murdo Macklin.

Dust puffed sluggishly under the shod hoofs. A brassy sun beat down on them out of a sky that held no shred of clouds. At the head of the column of silent men rode Clem Carter, his head bent, his eyes seared with pain. Beside him rode Tommy, alike in build and looks. Tall, lean, lipless in this mood of retribution. Father and son, riding to kill because their son and brother had died. It would take more power than belonged to the sheriff of Paradise to check that column of death. And at that hour of that day the sheriff and Pete Tondro were leaving the Diamond M Ranch with Andy Carr and Reb.

So it was that the men of Paradise passed within a few miles of where Pete and Jerky were fighting. And by a chance they likewise missed Murdo Macklin and Harvey, who were trailing the sheriff, his new deputy, and the two prisoners. And while Murdo and Harvey were talking to Jerky after the fight, the Carters and their followers rode up to the Diamond M Ranch.

The half dozen Diamond M cowpunchers there were caught unawares. Under the leveled guns of the vigilantes, they raised their hands.

"Where's Murdo Macklin and his whelp?" growled Clem Carter.

"We don't know. They ain't here, Carter."

"These coyotes 'u'd lie, anyhow," said Tommy. "We'll take a look around. Kill any man that tries to get in our way, boys."

They strode into the house, searching every room. Every building on the place was thoroughly searched.

Half an hour of this vain hunt convinced Clem Carter that Murdo and his son were not there.

"We'll head for the White Barn," snarled Clem. "Come on, men."

And so it came about that fate threw them on a right track. Because, not an hour ago, Harvey Macklin had said to his father:

"I'll prove to you that Henry Benner is double crossing you. You don't dare go with me to the White Barn and face Benner with me."

"No? I'll go there to the White Barn with you, and I'll make you prove all you've said against him."

Harvey smiled crookedly. "We'll go by way of the lower trail that follers the new drift fence."

"It's ten miles longer, that a way."

"There's some old sayin', paw, about the longest road sometimes bein' the shortest way home. I figger by takin' that trail and follerin' sign, made no later than early this mornin', to convince you I'm right about Henry Benner."

"What do you mean, son?"

"I happened to overhear a little conversation between Andy Carr and Reb down at the barn this mornin'. If what I heard is true, then I won't have a hard time provin' Henry Benner a skunk."

They pushed hard for the drift fence. By midafternoon Harvey and Murdo Macklin pulled up at the ruined fence. Old Murdo's face was actually gray with fury.

"The danged Carters done this last night!" he said huskily.

"Here's the sign of the wire cutters. Tracks as plain as the print in a book. If these tracks lead to Paradise, then I lose. But it's my bet that they'll take us straight to the White Barn."

"What kinda fool's talk is this?" growled the old cowman.

"Foller me and find out. And we'll —— Great Heaven! Look here!"

Where the trail dipped into a barranca where the junipers and sycamores were thick, something dangled from a tree limb. The body of a man. Harvey was off his horse now, a look of horror in his eyes.

"It's Dode Carter, paw. Help me cut him down. Dang Benner for a crawlin' snake. Dode! Shot in the back and strung up!"

"Henry musta ketched him cuttin' the fence," growled Murdo Macklin, "but I never give him no such orders."

"Dode Carter never cut that fence. You never knowed, nor the other Carters never knowed, but ol' Dode was my friend. I was talkin' to him on my way home from Paradise. We rode a ways together and had a long talk. It was white moonlight, and he was horse huntin'. He told me he figgered his horses might be hung up along the drift fence, and he was goin' home that a way. He musta run onto the Benner band cuttin' the fence, and they murdered him. There's your proof."

Murdo shook his white head. "'Tain't sufficient. That girl has you blind. Henry Benner never done that wire cuttin'."

Harvey had laid Dode Carter's body on the ground. With gentle hands he covered the dead cowboy with the slicker he took from his own saddle.

"Good old Dode. They got you, didn't they, boy? Got you in the back. Without ever givin' you a chance to go out fightin'. Well, Dode, I'll do by you just the same as you'd be doin' by

me if it was me a-layin' under that slicker. I'll get as many of 'em as I can, cowboy. So long, Dode. So long. And rest easy, boy."

He slid Dode Carter's six-shooter from its scabbard and slipped it into his waistband. Then, his father's eyes watching, Harvey pointed to the tracks in the dirt.

"I'm follerin' these tracks until they lead me to the men that done this. When I sight 'em, I'll commence shootin'." And without looking back at his father, Harvey Macklin rode away, his eyes following the sign left by the fence cutters. Behind him rode old Murdo Macklin, his head bowed in deep, brooding thought.

Perhaps the old cattle baron saw the beginning of the end of his reign, for behind the bitterness and hardness in his eyes there lay a tragic sadness. In silence unbroken he followed his son. It was nearing sundown when Harvey pulled up. He pointed to fresh tracks that met the sign made by the wire cutters.

"That'll be Andy Carr and Reb, and that bunch that Benner sent over to meet 'em at the old cabin. We'll find our men at the White Barn. We both know that. This is the show-down. Two of us against twenty. Paw, you'd better turn back from here."

"Why?"

"Because they'll kill you on sight. Henry Benner has done declared his hand. He's played you against Clem Carter, and he's ready to set back and watch you two fight for the open range of Paradise Valley. I reckon that, by now, Clem Carter and the men of Paradise are out on the prod. Old man Barrows and Deafy Smith was murdered last night, and now, with Dode killed, they'll be on the warpath right. So Henry Benner plans to set back and watch you and them fight it out. And when both sides has lost the best of their men, Henry Benner plans to take the valley with his snakes. He's a-playin' both ends against the middle. And unless we throw in with the Carters, Benner stands a good chance to win out."

"You think the Carters will be out on the warpath, Harvey?" asked Murdo Macklin calmly.

"They're bound to be."

"Jerky Hyatt and that Pete feller will be comin' along directly, follerin' the sign left by Andy and Reb. They'd orter be along about almost any time now. Ain't that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Now, I——"

"I want you to turn back home, paw. This is my fight. You go back, and when the Carters come, tell 'em that I——"

"Be still!" thundered Murdo Macklin suddenly. "Speak when you're spoken to. I'm Murdo Macklin, and I take orders from no man. And you seem to be forgettin', young man, that I'm your father. Now I'll give the orders and you take 'em. You'll wait right here until the sheriff and his Pete deputy show up. Then you'll locate the Carter crowd, and you'll fetch 'em to the White Barn. I'll be there, and so will Henry Benner. So will Andy Carr and Reb. If murder has been done, then the price of murder will be paid in full."

"You can't go there alone!" cried Harvey.

"I can't? The White Barn is on Diamond M land. It and every man there belongs to Murdo Macklin. Who are you to tell Murdo Macklin that he can't or can go anywhere? You'll stay here. And when your squatter friends get here, fetch 'em to the White Barn. And we'll settle this business as it should be settled. If wrong has been done, then it'll be righted. And if it's up to Clem Carter to pay, he'll pay. But if Henry Benner has done wrong, he'll pay for that wrong with a rope around

his neck. It's Murdo Macklin that's a-talkin'. 'Bide here, son."

Murdo Macklin's sadness, his brooding bitterness, had slipped from him. There was the glint of indomitable courage in his eyes, and the thrust to his bearded jaws was as stanch, and hard, and uncompromising, as some granite monument to courage and fortitude. Harvey Macklin, awed by the older man's fire and stern discipline, was forced into silent obedience. It was the king of Paradise Valley who commanded. And Harvey Macklin had not the temerity to cross him.

There was something a little splendid in the tilt to old Murdo Macklin's head, the straightness of his back, as he rode away alone. For there rode, after all was said and done, a man of power. Regardless of the sins checked against him, regardless of what methods he had used in gaining power, there rode the baron of Paradise Valley. No king's throne was ever made without bloodshed. No ruler's power was ever untainted by ruthless generalship. And whatever men might say of Murdo Macklin of the Diamond M, no man could call him a weakling or a coward.

It seemed to Harvey, his son, that Murdo Macklin had never looked more splendid, nor more alone, than he now looked as he rode forth to meet the climax of his kingship of Paradise Valley. And with a sensation of utter futility Harvey Macklin sat his horse and watched Murdo Macklin ride away alone to meet his enemies. No son, no friend, could stand beside that old man who had fought alone always and thanked no man for aid. It was something that Murdo Macklin could meet no other way. The last slanting light of a setting sun showed the silver of his hair and the steely glint of the naked carbine he carried in the crook of his elbow. Murdo Macklin rode away. Even if he rode to defeat, never had he been more indomitable.

CHAPTER X.

SUNRISE.

THERE was no fear in the level gaze of Harvey Macklin as he faced the cocked gun in Clem Carter's hand.

"We just found Dode," said Clem Carter in a voice that was terrible and deadly because it showed no heat of anger. "Now we locate you. We're hangin' you here like you hung Dode."

"Dode was my friend, Mr. Carter. He's never been anything to me but my friend. I been waitin' here for you to come along."

Some one put a noose around Harvey's neck. Another man led Harvey's horse under a stout limb.

"What have you got to say before we jerk you up, Harvey Macklin?" asked Clem Carter.

"I say I was Dode's friend. That I never killed him. That I've been waitin' to take you to the White Barn and see justice done for his murder."

"A likely fairy tale," sneered one of the vigilantes. "Tryin' to crawl out of it, ain't you? Tryin' to beg off. Well, you can't do it. You're Murdo Macklin's son, and no man but Murdo Macklin is responsible for Dode Carter's murder. His hired killers done this. There's no use in arguin'."

"No," agreed Harvey, his lips tightening, "there's no use in arguin'. If this is my time to die, I'll show you men of Paradise that Murdo Macklin's son can die game. Tommy, here is Dode's six-shooter. I taken it when I cut him down from where Henry Benner had hung him. These men ain't givin' me my chance to use it on Benner. So you better take it. And if you and Clem Carter think I'm guilty of Dode's murder, then I want that you two do this hangin' job alone. Then go home and tell Hattie that you hung her husband and the father of the little baby that is goin' to come."

Tommy Carter, his brow knit in a

troubled scowl, looked at his father. Clem's eyes were greenish slits. Dode's death had done something to shrivel all the mercy in his heart.

"Dad," said Tommy huskily, "supposin' we was doin' the wrong thing? I've always sorta knowed that Harvey and Dode was friends. I'd shore hate to face Hattie, knowin' we'd done wrong." He took Dode's gun from Harvey's waistband. Harvey handed him an envelope stained with a dried red. "It's a note to Hattie. When I met Dode last night, I give it to him to deliver to her. It was on Dode's body."

Impetuously, Tommy Carter jerked the noose from Harvey's neck.

"I'll be responsible, men. By God, we're not murderers! If Harvey Macklin needs killin', I'll 'tend to him, personal. The man we want is Henry Benner."

"And we'll take Murdo Macklin where we find him," growled Clem Carter. "Tommy, ride herd on Harvey Macklin. The first bad move he makes, kill him. Who's that a-comin'?"

"It's Jerky Hyatt," cried one of the crowd. "Jerky and the Pete gent."

Harvey Macklin grinned wryly at Tommy Carter. "That was a close un, Tommy. And I'm thankin' you now."

"Save your thanks," said Tommy stiffly. "I done it for my kid sister, not for you. You don't owe me a dime."

Jerky and Pete rode up. Jerky scowled in a puzzled manner.

"What's the idee, boys?"

Clem Carter turned to his son. "Tell him, Tommy."

In a few brief sentences Tommy Carter explained their grim errand. Jerky and Pete listened. Jerky jerked a thumb at the dangling rope.

"Just who was bein' the honored guest at the necktie party?"

"None other than me, pardner," said Harvey dryly.

"Hmmm. And just when was any man in this valley given the right to hang men? Harvey never killed Dode. You'd 've hung an innocent man. Harvey, where's Murdo?"

"He rode on to the White Barn."

"Alone?"

"He wouldn't let me go along. Told me to wait for the Carters and you boys, and fetch you to the White Barn for a big powwow. He went alone."

Jerky was silent for a long moment. "I reckon," he said finally, his voice low-pitched and vibrant, "that's the way he wanted it. Murdo Macklin wanted to do it that a way. Just—alone."

Jerky turned to the vigilantes. "Let's get goin'. We got a night's job ahead of us. We got to finish what Murdo Macklin has started."

A grim silence gripped the cavalcade. Up in the lead rode Pete Tondro, Harvey Macklin, and Jerky. Behind them, the two Carters. A dozen other men trailed behind.

On through the last glow of the sunset, on into a shadow-filled dusk. Until, there ahead in the darkness, showed the lights of the White Barn.

Jerky pulled up.

"Well, men, there's where we'll find our quarry. Clem, you and Tommy stay here with these men. Pete, and Harvey, and me are goin' up to do some scoutin' around. Just to see what we can see. Lay low, now. But if you hear shootin', then come on a lope. But don't go killin' off folks wanton, because that ain't our way. This is a vigilante posse, not a mob of hoodlums. Just kinda spread out till you got the place surrounded. Meanwhile, us three boys will get the lay of things."

And before Clem or Tommy Carter could offer argument, Jerky, Pete, and Harvey had ridden on.

Unchallenged, they rode along the trail. As they came nearer, they could hear the pounding of a tin-pan piano. Now and then, across the unshaded

windows, passed the shadows of moving figures. Now two men lurched drunkenly from an open doorway and stood swaying on the veranda, arms about each other's shoulders, singing some maudlin song.

Jerky quietly pulled his gun. Pete and Harvey did likewise.

"There's only two doors to the place. Pete, you and Harvey slip around back. I'll give you time to make it. Got a watch?"

"I got one," said Harvey.

"Good. I'll allow ten minutes, then I'll step in the front door. Don't shoot unless you have to. But shoot to kill, because one of these kind is dangerous till he's dead. So long, boys. Good luck."

"Good luck," they called back softly, and leaving their horses hidden in the brush, they began their cautious attack. While behind them the posse spread to surround the place. A round white moon, rising above the sky line, shed its light on the scene.

Pete and Harvey separated so as to gain the rear door by coming from opposite sides of the house. A little precaution to see, if possible, what guards were posted, or if there were any. From inside came the boisterous racket of drunken men. It struck Pete as odd that he heard no women's voices. Now, slipping along the edge of the building, he ventured a look through one of the windows. A dozen or more men were at the bar drinking. A pasty-faced individual thumped the piano with nimble, dingy hands. But there was no trace of Henry Benner, nor was there any indication that Murdo Macklin was there or had been there. This was simply a drunken crew of cowpunchers turned bad.

Pete looked for Andy Carr and Reb. Neither of the two killers was there. A vague uneasiness came over Pete, and he moved on toward the rear of the house. No man challenged his going. He found Harvey, ready, and sheltered behind some empty barrels and cases. They crouched there, waiting. Harvey had his watch in his hand, its dial tilted to catch the light from a rear window. Harvey nodded and pocketed his watch. Together they rose. Pete softly opened the back door, and Harvey followed him into the hallway. The doors of half a dozen rooms stood open. Their disorder gave every evidence that the women had made a hasty departure.

Their six-shooters ready, the two men slipped along the deserted hall. A drunken fellow, sprawled on a bed, lay on his back, snoring loudly, an empty bottle still gripped fast.

Now they stood in the saloon. Jerky, a sawed-off shotgun in his hand, stood there with his back to the wall, covering the crowd that grinned and leered at him.

"I'm after Henry Benner," said Jerky in a cold, brittle voice. "Where is he?"

"Henry," volunteered a big fellow with heavy black whiskers, "has gone down the street with his spats on, and his monocle, and his cane. He's out exercisin' his lap dawg. Who in thunder are you, anyhow?"

"Pete," called Jerky, "cover that talkative gent. I'm gonna repeat that question. If he don't give us the right answer, shoot him where his galluses cross. His name is Larrabie, and he's wanted in Texas for murder. Got 'im covered, Pete?"

"I'll tell a man. And the pleasure will be all mine, sheriff."

The black-bearded man stiffened. Heads now turned to see the guns of Pete Tondro and Harvey Macklin covering them. The piano player smiled thinly and lit a cigarette.

"Now, Larrabie, where's your boss?" repeated Jerky quietly. Pete grinned crookedly and thumbed his gun hammer to full cock.

"He's not here, sheriff. Word come that there was a posse headin' this way.

The gals got skeered and pulled out. Then Henry 'lowed he was goin' for a ride. He pulled out alone. Then Andy Carr and Reb shows up with some of the boys. They changes hosses and pulls out without even stoppin' to get drunk. And it ain't an hour till up rides old Murdo Macklin with fire in his eye. He stops for a drink and a fresh hoss, then hits the trail. And if Henry Benner or any other man thinks us boys is gonna swap bullets with the law so that they can make a nice, clean git-away, then they got another guess a-comin'. Here's the joint. Take it. There ain't much likker left, noways. And concernin' that Texas indictment, I beat it. You'd be wastin' your time arrestin' me. And there's your story, Mr. Sheriff. How do you like it?"

"I don't like it, Larrabie, worth a hang. You're lyin'. Pete, instead of killin' this big black brute, let him have it in the arm. The right arm, just—— Look out, Pete!"

The big black-whiskered outlaw had, with startling agility, leaped behind two or three other men. His gun spat flame. Pete's .45 roared, and the big man spun about, his left hand grabbing a shattered right shoulder. The crash of shattered windowpanes. The kerosene lamps shot out. In the inky blackness, the stab of brief gun flames. Curses; panting breaths; the crash of overturned chairs and tables; the sting of powder smoke, and the deafening crash of guns. Above the other chaos of noise, a man's laugh—mocking, taunting, jangling.

Pete Tondro had heard that laugh once before. Years before. When Henry Benner, killer, had shot down his father in the doorway of his cabin up in Montana on the bank of the Missouri River.

That laugh ripped through the bewilderment that fogged Pete's brain. He charged toward the sound, saving his bullets, clubbing whatever got in his path in that terror-filled darkness. He ran into the bar, vaulted it, landed on something soft and yielding. Under his weight, a man groaned. Pete's fingers sought the throat, then relaxed quickly. He had felt the whiskers on a man's face. A gag drawn tightly across the man's mouth. The man was tied there. Now there came an echo of that laughter that was worse than a curse. It came from outside. Pete Tondro would never know how he recognized the gagged and bound Murdo Macklin there in the dark, but he did. He stopped long enough to cut the cowman free, then he smashed his way through a window and outside.

Chaos now. Friend and enemy looked alike. Just swift-moving shadows. Blots in the night that seemed filled with horses and men and the crack of gun flames. Some one rushed past Pete. A short, heavy-shouldered man running on bowed legs. Murdo Macklin. Then a man on horseback sped away in the dark. Pete ran for the brush clump that hid his horse. He could hear Clem Carter's voice somewhere behind, Jerky's futile shouts to call a surrender of Benner's men. The next moment Pete threw a leg across his saddle and was racing along the trail to Paradise. The dust that crept into his face told him he was close behind the man he wanted. The man who had killed his father. The man who planned the rape of Paradise Valley. Henry Benner rode ahead, there in the moonlit night.

Pete was vaguely aware of the fact that men were behind him. Now, with a sudden shock, he somehow knew that he was following not one man, but several. He heard their hoarse voices from up ahead. Once he caught the fleeting glimpse of three or four riders, briefly sky-lighted, then gone from sight.

There was some one coming up behind Pete now. A man on a horse that was more fresh than Pete's mount.

"Pull up, dang you, or I'll drop you!"

That was Murdo Macklin's voice. Pete swung aside as the grizzled old cowman came up. Their horses collided. A moment's confusion.

"Heck, it's the Pete feller! Thought you was Benner. Come on, young feller. There's a game up ahead!"

Another man on horseback now came up. His gun barrel glittered in the moonlight. Pete struck up the gun just in time.

"Hold your temper, Clem Carter. And hold your ca'tridges."

"Our quarrel will wait, Carter," growled Murdo Macklin. "Yonder goes our men. When I'm done with them, I'll take you on, Clem Carter. Me and you. And the winner takes the valley."

"Calls the bet, Macklin. Who's ahead?"

"The men as killed your son and would kill mine. Is that enough?"

"That's a-plenty."

"It's Henry Benner," rasped Pete, spurring his horse to a run. "Henry Benner, and Andy Carr, and Reb, and that Larrabie snake."

And as Pete Tondro spurred ahead, Clem Carter and Murdo Macklin followed him. For the first time in their lives, these two enemies rode side by side. And they rode now on an errand of death. On a trail of vengeance, united against a common enemy.

No word passed between the two old enemies. Their horses spurred to a run, their guns in their hands, they followed Pete Tondro, a stranger in Paradise. It must have been that, in those brief moments, some sort of understanding rode with them.

"Clem—I been wrong—and it's too late now to say so—but I'm sayin' it. Your girl, Clem, and that boy of mine—they don't mate 'em better nowheres. They're both of 'em better'n us, Clem Carter. Whatever happens, I want 'em to be—to be happy, Clem."

"Harvey Macklin's a man," spoke Clem Carter. "I knowed it. But I was just too danged mule-headed to give in. I reckon, Murdo, that we both been wrong. Hold on, Murdo, you're hurt!"

But Murdo Macklin smiled grimly and rode on, his left hand pressed against his side, from which red oozed across his shirt front.

Now a fusillade of shots met Pete and his two followers. Murdo and Clem Carter were shooting with grim deadliness. Pete, six-shooter belching, rode at Henry Benner, who had leaped to the ground and was using two guns.

With a snarling scream, Andy Carr pitched from his saddle. Reb swung to the ground and stood over his fallen partner. And whatever kind of craven Reb had been in life, he made a splendid effort to redeem it by his manner of passing. His body shielding Andy's bullet-pierced form, he knelt there, jerking the lever of his Winchester, until a bullet from Murdo Macklin's gun sent him down in a lifeless heap.

Pete, on foot now, advanced toward Henry Benner. Across the moonlit ground they faced one another. In each of their guns was left one unexploded cartridge. Now Benner lurched forward, his laugh shattering the gun echoes. His gun spat red. But even as he fired, he slid to the ground.

Pete, his one cartridge left unfired, stood there, a smear of crimson across his face, his left arm hanging limply along his side so that the red ran across his numb hand.

Old Murdo Macklin sat his horse, a smoking gun in his hand.

"I got him, Pete feller," he said stiffly. "For what you done for my son one night, and for his little wife, I paid off Henry Benner. Clem, will you help me off this hoss? I—I'm all done with ridin'. And with shootin'. My gun—is—empty."

He was dead when Clem Carter's long arms lifted him from the saddle.

Murdo Macklin, the cattle king of Paradise Valley, had passed on along his last long trail. Death had dethroned him. And in his hour of defeat he had been greater than ever he had been in victory.

Tommy Carter and Harvey rode up half an hour later. Behind them showed a red glow in the sky. The White Barn was going up in crimson flames. And the vigilantes rode homeward with their prisoners. The war at Paradise Valley was ended.

Harvey knelt there on the ground beside his dead father. Unshed tears stung his eyes. Clem Carter spoke to the grief-stricken boy in a voice that had grown strangely gentle.

"I reckon you'll want to be alone, Harvey. But when you get done here, Hattie's a-waitin' for you at home."

Harvey thanked him with his eyes. Clem and Tommy mounted and rode homeward. Jerky laid a hand on Harvey's shoulder, gripped it hard, then turned away. As sheriff of Paradise he still had work to do taking care of the prisoners. Now, only Pete remained.

Pete Tondro covered the dead bodies of Andy Carr and Rebel. He stood there, looking down at the handsome, masklike face of the dead Henry Benner. For a long time he stood thus. Then he covered Benner's face with a coat and sat apart, while Harvey Macklin sat beside the body of his father.

What had been Murdo Macklin's would now become Harvey's. Peace would come to Paradise Valley with the new sunrise. There would be no more need of warnings written on the rocks, or drift fences.

Pete watched that sunrise. Harvey Macklin sat beside him. A meadowlark sang.

"Pete," said Harvey, "you've been our friend. The Diamond M is mine now. There's good land there to be taken up. I'd be proud to stake you to whatever kind of a lay you'd like."

"Thanks, Harvey, but I'll be a-driftin' along. If I stayed here, just about the time I got settled, the law would take me away. Fu'ther south, in Mexico or South America, I might find what I'm lookin' for. But it ain't here. I'd only bring you all more trouble. I'll stop here long enough to rest up my blue horse, then I'll be a-travelin' yonderly."

CHAPTER XI.

PLUMB WILLIN'.

TWO weeks later, at the Diamond M Ranch, Pete Tondro saddled his blue horse. Hattie and Harvey Macklin bade him farewell.

"Let us know when you find that new range, Pete. We'll be waiting for news from you."

"Yes, ma'am." Pete looked around anxiously. Then a brown-eyed, copper-haired girl in cow-puncher overalls and flannel and chaps, rode out of the barn.

"I thought I'd ride a ways with you, Pete. Just to sort of see you along your way."

"Gosh!" Pete's ears reddened. "Gosh, that'll be fine of you, June."

Side by side they rode away from the Diamond M Ranch. Now and then their stirrups touched. Pete could find no words to break the silence that held them. June Carter seemed at a loss for once. Usually, she was as full of conversation, so, claimed her brother Tommy, as a magpie. But now she rode with Pete as he left Paradise Valley for good, and she could not begin to say what she had promised herself to say to this cowboy who had ridden into her life and now was riding away again without telling her what she knew was in his heart since that day at Dode's funeral when he had found her alone in the hills, sobbing her heart out. That day when he had taken her in his arms and held her as he would have held a grief-stricken child, until her sobbing ceased. And together they had ridden

back to the Carter home. Not that day, nor on any of the following days, had Pete Tondro spoken of that love for her that showed so plainly in his every action and in his eyes.

"Pete?" June's voice finally broke the silence.

"Ma'am?" He jumped as if shot at. Then they both laughed. But their laughter had a strained sort of shaky quaver in it.

"You're leaving Paradise. You're drifting with the wind. Hunting a new range. Somewhere, Pete, you'll find it, because you deserve to find it. You'll be mighty happy there."

"I'll be mighty lonesome," he said, without daring to look at her.

June smiled to herself. Then, when he did not go on, she frowned. Her small, tanned hands knotted and unknotted her bridle reins. There came a trace of tears in her eyes. Suddenly she reined up her horse.

"Pete Tondro, you're a darned coward!" she cried. "I do believe you'd ride off without ever—ever—— Darn you, Pete, say it! Say it, you bonehead!"

"Say what?" Pete looked at her tears in blank astonishment.

With a sob, June whirled her horse. Pete spun the blue roan around and raced after her. He was alongside her now, and his hand reached out to pull up her horse. Pete's face was a little white. Swinging to the ground, he stood beside her stirrup, and his hands found hers.

"Gosh, I couldn't let you go back without ever tellin' me good-by, June. I don't know what I've done to make you feel like cryin'. I reckon I'm a bonehead all right. I'm sorry I did anything to hurt you. Gosh, June, I'd a heap ruther die than hurt you. Lordy, why can't you see I just plumb love you?"

"Then, you big bonehead, lift me down off this horse and act like it!"

It was some minutes later when Pete let her wriggle from his arms.

"Well, cowhand," she laughed, her face flushed and her eyes bright with excitement, "we'd better be getting along. We'll make San Salvador by night and hunt up the padre there. Then Mr. and Mrs. Pete Tondro will ride on hunting that new range."

"Gosh, honey, you can't come along."

"No? I can go anywhere where the man I love goes. I wouldn't stay behind for anything. Hattie knows I'm going. So does Harvey. And I made Jerky Hyatt promise to meet us at San Salvador."

"You mean you knowed——"

"I've got an extra shirt and a pair of socks in my slicker. Jerky'll have two loaded pack horses waiting at San Salvador. I know I'm a bold, brazen little brat, and I'm practically kidnaping myself and tagging along; but us Carters is sot in our ways, Pete, and what we go after we most mebbe get. I did all the courtin', and later on when we quarrel you can throw it up at me, but I'd roped you and tied my rope hard and fast."

"Well, such bein' the case, pardner, I'm just too darned proud to be hog tied. And win, lose, or draw, June, we'll ride together."

And that evening at San Salvador, as they rode into the old Spanish town, Jerky Hyatt and Tommy Carter were there to meet them.

"The padre's a-waitin'," grinned Tommy, "to make this son of a gun my brother-in-law. Jerky, you darned rascal, shake."

"Did you get the pack horses, Jerky?" asked Pete, when June and Tommy had walked up ahead.

"Nope. You won't need 'em. Think we'd let a good cowhand get out of the valley? Here's your weddin' present, pardner." The young sheriff handed Pete a legal-looking envelope.

"What's this, Jerky?"

"A check for ten thousand dollars. It's the reward Texas offers for the capture, dead or alive, of an outlaw named Asa Hutchinson. He and his two brothers was members of the old Bill Tupper crowd down on the border. That black-whiskered Larrabie gent squealed on 'em when I got him cornered and a-talkin'. Their right names is Larrabie and they're cousins of the big, black-muzzled cuss we ketched at the White Barn. He wired 'em for help, and that's the way I lined 'em up. The reward on 'em reads dead or alive. Well, you got Asa dead, and the other two is now in jail awaitin' extradition to Texas, where they'll likely hang. You're as free as the air, Pete. Congratulations!"

There was a little delay at the padre's house. The delay was explained by the appearance of Clem Carter and his wife, and Harvey and Hattie Macklin.

"Looks like everybody around here but me knowed I was gittin' married tonight," grinned the excited cowpuncher.

"And those of us that ain't here," chuckled Clem, "is a-layin' for you back at Paradise. And you better begin makin' arrangements to sell that Montana place of yours, son. Because once us valley folks takes in a new squatter, he's there for keeps."

"I'm willin'," agreed Pete, squeezing June's hand. "Plumb. Who wouldn't be willin' to take up a squatter's claim in Paradise?"

"FORTUNE GRABBERS," a novelette, by SETH RANGER, in Next Week's Issue.

SOME SEEDS ARE LONG-DISTANCE TRAVELERS

IN reading of the traveling propensities of our "common and garden seeds," as related by the United States department of agriculture, one immediately thinks of the children's game of "post office" where every player represents a town or country and at the word of the leader instantly leaves his place and starts off to the seat of another player. But the general clearing house for the seeds is in the packet which we buy from the wholesale seed houses, which include seed travelers from all parts of the United States and even from foreign countries as well.

Seeds have followed the national tendency to go West, and since 1860 seed production has moved westward from New York, Idaho, Montana, and California. Temperature, humidity, soil, and water supply, all have their effect on the development of the seed crop. Transportation expense also has its inevitable result on the voyaging of the seeds. If transportation is high, seed production may be developed in a certain area, and cheap labor also has its influence on the seed crop.

Perhaps it would be interesting to know where some of our favorite delicacies come from. Nebraska is a large producer of sweet-corn seed. Rocky Ford—Colorado—and muskmelon are almost synonymous, and cucumber seed also comes from this stonily named locality. A large proportion of the squash and pumpkin seed comes from the plains of Kansas and Nebraska, and watermelon seed comes from Colorado, as well as from Florida and Texas.

Keep The Doctor Away

(A Shorty Nolan Story)

By Roland Krebs

Author of "Monkey Dice," etc.

THE medicine man who looks after the ails and miseries of the folks in this part of Montana, Doctor Hugo Richter, pulled up his horse to where I was sittin' on a fence rail beside the county road and lit him his pipe.

"Evenin', Al," the old fellow said affably. "Sure's a pretty moon comin' out this evenin'."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Pity there ain't more folks in love in this neck of the woods to take advantage of the romantic moonlight and all, ain't it?"

The doc, who is a sort of a human newspaper on account he gets around so much, gave me the low-down for a few minutes on what was going on and then squinted and peered over my shoulder.

"Ain't that 'Shorty' Nolan sittin' on that old stump over there and moonin'?" he asked me, lowering his voice.

"It certainly is," I said after looking, "and I'll give you three guesses as to what he's thinking about."

"One's plenty, thanks," Doctor Richter laughed. "He's thinkin' about Alberta Pritchard, the pretty Snake Hollow school-teacher, and sort of mixed in with his thoughts is the wish that 'Slim' Evers would either have the bad luck to die or the good luck to inherit fifty thousand dollars and move far away. It's a wonder to me you fellows on the R Bar R here don't laugh yourselves sick over them two crazy Romeos."

"We would have—long ago—if it wasn't often so sad," I chuckled.

Shorty Nolan and Slim Evers, friends of my rodeo audience, have been hated rivals for years in a struggle for

the affections of the young schoolteacher.

"Ain't he a pathetic sight, though?" Doctor Richter laughed. "Look at him, with his head in his hands. I can almost hear the critter sigh. He's suffering from the worst case of devotion I ever heard tell of."

"You're all wrong about the devotion, doc," I said. "Shorty's fickle—very, very fickle. While it's true he always gets back to admiring Alberta, he falls for every dame that comes along. In fact, I'll lay you ten to one right now he'll fall again in the next few days."

"Who for?" asked the doc, shocked to hear of this unsuspected weakness on Shorty Nolan's part.

"The boss' niece from the East," I told him. "Mr. Rockwood tells me she's a darned pretty girl. She's a nurse. I'm going to meet the morning train and bring her out to the R Bar R. She's spending a week or so with her uncle."

"Guess I better make the young lady's acquaintance, her and I being members of the same profession," Doctor Richter said with a wink. "I ain't too old yet not to appreciate a sweet smile from a pretty gal."

Next day, when I drove into town to call at the railroad depot for the visitor, I saw Shorty Nolan standing in the doorway of the drug store, a smile hanging from his ears just like a hammock.

"What're you jubilatin' about?" I asked him.

"Just called up Alberta and made a date with her for to-morrow night," he told me happily. Then, with even more joy, he added: "I think I stole a little march on Slim, Al. I kind of think he was fixin' to give her a ring and ask to see her to-morrow night, but I phoned first."

With that he strolled away, whistling "The Stars and Stripes Forever" in a way that would have made John Philip Sousa sit up and take notice. I mean to say it was terrible.

I shuffled on to the depot and got there just as the morning train was puffing in. I didn't have any trouble finding the boss' niece, because she was the only passenger getting off the rattler. Man, oh, man! Why anybody in the East, where she came from, goes West to look at scenic beauties with her right handy at home is something I can't figure out. She was tall and slender, had lovely features, brilliantly black hair, big, talkative, brown eyes, a smile that mowed me down, and a voice like temple bells.

"I'm Miss Rockwood, Mr. Rockwood's niece; are you Mr. Crews?" she said.

I told her I was as best I was able and felt like adding that I was her victim at her service. It's a shame to walk with a girl like her and not have a fifty-piece brass band out ahead of you to attract people's attention to the distinction you're getting.

As we drove through the town, her sitting right beside me and smiling and chatting in her friendly way, we passed Shorty Nolan, and when he saw who my companion was his mouth opened so far it hid the rest of his face. I just nodded like he was only a chance acquaintance.

Before Miss Rockwood—Joan Rockwood was her name—and I got to the R Bar R, I had made up my mind that from every angle you looked at the situation, our boss was blessed with a mighty attractive niece. I was sorry she was going to stick around such a short time.

Well, sir, I had to smile to myself when I saw Shorty Nolan drive up in a cloud of dust about two minutes after Joan and me arrived at the ranch house. Somehow I just had a hunch he was going to prove what I said to Doc Richter about him being fickle.

Shorty didn't lose any time whatever

exposing Joan Rockwood to his magnetic personality. I was carrying some of her duffel into the ranch house—just a scant handful of luggage—when he rushed up and said briskly, "Let me bear a hand with that for you, Al."

Knowing what he was itching for, I gave it to him—an introduction to the beautiful visitor. He whipped off his hat with a sweep like him and I once saw some musketeers do in a movie, bowed and, believe it or not, said, "Charmed, I'm sure." Then he blushed so hard that his face, waved in front of a transcontinental express train, would have stopped it so suddenly that not a passenger would have been able to stay in his seat. Personally, I would have laughed at the little clown if I had been her; but Joan just gave him a big smile, a mighty friendly handshake, and acted like she was tickled to death to meet him.

"Gosh, ain't she a heavenly beauty though!" Shorty gasped to me the first time were were alone. "What's her name? Is she married? What does she do besides being the 'Old Man's' niece?"

"Her name's Miss Rockwood, but I guess you'll soon be calling her Joan—her first name," I said. "She ain't married, but she's liable to be if she stays around you long, you heart-breaker! She's a nurse in some big hospital back East—a hospital to which I aim to take all my trade if I ever go back East."

I wish you could have seen the little goof smile and blush when I called him a heart-breaker. He just fattens on flattery. His eyes got dreamy and he stared off into space.

"Golly, I'll bet she's a wonderful nurse!" he sighed.

"Why? Do you think a girl like that's got time to sit around holding her patients' hands all day?" I asked him.

"No, but it's so—uh—inspiring to have her around," he told me. "She looks so gentle."

"Well, if it's gentleness you admire most in a woman," I answered him, "why, you ought to be satisfied with Alberta."

"Who?" he asked absent-mindedly.

"Alberta."

"Alberta who?"

"Why——"

"Oh—Alberta. Yeah, Alberta's a nice kid. Hum."

What did I tell you?

For the next hour Shorty sat on a wood-chopping block staring—staring always in the direction of the ranch house.

When noon came I knew he was smitten, and smitten hard, because Wolfgang G. Schaeperkoetter, our cook, had a meal that ordinarily would have meant a gorged Shorty Nolan. "The Wolf" had German pancakes—they're better than lots of women's layer cakes—and it was no uncommon sight to see Shorty stuff away a dozen or more at one séance. But this noon he ate half a pancake without any enthusiasm and then looked all done up on top of it.

"What's the matter—did somebody feed you on roast turkey stuffed with oyster dressing just before you sat down here?" the cook asked.

"I'm afraid I'm sick, Wolf," Shorty complained, making a miserable face.

"What ails you?" asked old "Biffalo" Bull, dean of the bunk house.

"I got a pain—a very sharp pain—right down here in my lower right side," the little cow-punch grunted. "I'm afraid maybe it's appendicitis."

"Then I guess we'll have to shoot you, Shorty," Biffalo announced seriously. "Appendictis is a terrible malady. We don't want to see you suffer."

"Maybe a operation would fix him up," suggested "Hungry" Hosford, reaching for the pancakes Shorty Nolan had left untouched and biting out of three at a time.

The sufferer pushed his chair back from the table, bent himself over, arms

folded across his stomach, and groaned, "Uh-ungh!"

"Gee, he looks pale!" the heartless Biffalo Bull exclaimed, clucking his tongue. "Do you feel pale, Shorty?"

With all this encouragement, Shorty was bound to get sicker and sicker, and this he did.

"Oh! The pain's spreading," he mumbled. "It's getting intenser, too."

"Let's see your tongue, Shorty," I said, acting kind of serious about it.

The little coot put out his tongue—and I never saw a healthier-looking one!—and rolled his eyes as though he felt faint.

"Now, let me feel your pulse," I went on.

His pulse was seventy-eight, which was good, and yet I shook my head gravely. Then I laid my hand on his forehead, which was nice and cool, and last counted his breathing.

"Hmmm! Signs of labored respiration," I remarked soberly.

"What's that?" the patient inquired suspiciously.

"Why," I went on, just as though I was talking sense, "that means that the assimilation of oxygen is rather rapid, entailing acute destruction of tissue. There are indications, also, of faulty functioning of the alimentary canal."

"Sort of looks to me like he's got a little touch of hog cholera and hoof-and-mouth ails," Biffalo put in, squinting at our Mr. Nolan.

"Shorty," I said, speaking gently, "I'm afraid you're a sick man. You need medical attention."

"Oh—oh—o—o—oh, my gosh!" he moaned. "I got a pain in every pore. I hope it's not the end."

"Pull yourself to pieces, old man," Hungry advised, taking another pancake.

"Hungry, as soon as you swallow that pancake," I suggested, "go to the phone and call Dr. Richter."

Hungry slipped two pancakes into a pocket and ambled off. Then I made the announcement that I felt pretty sure Shorty was waiting for.

"I don't think we ought to take any chances," I said, "waiting for the doctor to get here. I think I ought to ask Mr. Rockwood's niece to sort of look into Shorty's case, her being a nurse."

"Uh—ungh," was Shorty's contribution.

So I danced on up to the ranch house and saw Joan.

"I hate to bother you, Miss Rockwood," I apologized, "but we got a young man down at the bunk house who thinks he's dying. I've sent for a doctor, but I was wondering if you wouldn't like to take a squint at the little critter and see what you think."

"Why, I'll be glad to, Mr. Crews," she promised me. "What seems to be the trouble with him?"

"Well—uh—can I be perfectly frank with you—me being so much older than you and sort of entitled to talk to you like a father?" I asked.

She smiled and said, "Of course, you can!"

"Shorty—it's Shorty Nolan that's ailin'—appears to be suffering from a brunette affliction of the heart, although he calls it appendicitis for convenience," I explained to the puzzled young woman. "To get right down to cases, you're the cause of his collapse."

"I? How?"

So, I went on to tell her how Shorty usually was all smoked up about Alberta, the school-teacher, but that he was a very fickle young man who was always losing his heart to whatever sweet-looking young woman happened along.

"Without trying to hand you any apple sauce," I finished up, "you're plenty attractive, and the moment Shorty saw you he was under an anæsthetic."

Besides, I went on to tell her, Shorty's periodical excursions along the primrose path of dalliance weren't fair to Alberta,

because no gal likes to be let down too abruptly, and with this Joan heartily agreed.

"I am deeply flattered by Mr. Nolan's feelings, if you have interpreted them correctly," the little lady said, "but it happens that I am engaged to be married. I agree with you, too, that it is unfair to the school-teacher to be so susceptible to frequent attacks of fickleness." For a moment she looked away, studied, and then smiled. "Perhaps we can effect a complete cure in the patient."

A little while later Joan came over to the bunk house with a satchel and went to Shorty's bunk, where the miserable "sufferer" had laid hisself down to die, tra-la-la.

"I'm terribly sorry that you've been taken ill, Mr. Nolan," she said sympathetically as she got out a thermometer.

Shorty just groaned faintly. I believe the little coot was actually beginning to believe he was sick.

The nursie put the thermometer in his mouth and then laid her gentle hand on his forehead. Gosh! I wish you could have seen how he rolled his eyes up at her—just like a Llewellyn setter! It's a wonder he didn't lick her hand.

A minute later Joan removed the thermometer and stared at it. Then she frowned, looked at the patient again, arched her eyebrows, and looked worried.

"I think we came just in time," she said, "but you'll be out of danger—if you're a good patient and follow directions. Mr. Crews, will you come to the ranch house with me and get some equipment."

I trotted along and, once out of Shorty's hearing, Joan had a good laugh and so did I.

"As a diagnostician, you are one hundred per cent," she said. "Mr. Nolan is enjoying the best of health. However, for the psychological effect, we will cure him, none the less. The result ought to be that he will be afraid to get sick for a long, long time."

When we got back to the bunk house, I was carrying a regulation stomach pump, a smaller hose, and some bottles and a hot-water bag.

"What are you goin' to do with all them knickknacks?" Shorty asked nervously, when I laid them out on a table.

"Sh, sh! A patient mustn't ask questions and excite himself," Joan told him, laying her pretty hand on his dome once more. He rewarded her with a grunt. "Just leave everything with us."

Shorty made an awful roar when Hungry Hosford came back from the harness shed with some straps that we used to strap him into his bunk.

"What in the—what are going to do—operate me?" he asked, right scared.

"No, no; we're just going to pump you out," the angel of mercy said, acting like that was a very small matter about which a patient might exclaim, "Goody, goody!"

"Pump me out? What am I flooded with?" Shorty demanded.

"Toxic matters that may poison your whole system," Joan told him.

"I don't think I'll need to get siphoned out; I got a good, strong system," the midget cow-puncher argued.

Our gentle nurse didn't pay any attention to him. She stuffed the pump hose down his craw.

Cattle-branding is a pleasant way of passing the time compared with pumping out the department of the interior of Mr. Shorty Nolan. Mr. Nolan fought like a steer and howled and yelled like he was being killed. Yet, I know from experience that a stomach pump isn't such a torment at all. In fact, I think it has a very swell effect.

"Now you just lie there and rest for a while, Mr. Nolan," Joan said when we were finished. "Later on, we'll give you another treatment."

"I won't need any more treatments,"

Shorty sputtered. "I feel cured right now. I want to get up."

Hungry Hosford just tightened up the straps holding him down.

A litle later old Dr. Richter came along, examined Shorty, and then gravely announced that Miss Rockwood had the right dope and was doing just exactly as he would have done himself. I had tipped off the doc, you see.

"Gee, Shorty, you certainly were in luck to have that efficient little girl right here to step into the picture at the crucial moment," I told him.

"She's too derned efficient to suit me," the little guy grumbled.

Ho-ho! Already the love light was fading from his eyes. Well, I guess any girl can cure an infatuated guy with a stomach pump.

Shorty's squawking was cut short by his nurse's return, bringing with her a much thinner but longer red rubber hose.

"I hope you haven't got no firemen's hoses in your collection," Shorty said sarcastically when he saw the new gimmick.

"I'll be just as gentle as I can, Mr. Nolan," Joan answered sweetly.

"Yeah—I can imagine," the patient snorted.

Our guest got out some test tubes of glass and some chemicals and made Shorty swallow the hose like it was a long string of macaroni. This one went down easier, being narrow and of softer rubber. Then Joan poured some oatmeal water into him, siphoning it out again, and making tests in the tubes.

"Your gastric juices show a decided improvement," she told her victim after three such tests. "I think you'll get well."

"I'm beginning to doubt it," Shorty growled at her.

"Now, a nice dose of castor oil and you'll——"

"I don't want any castor oil!" Shorty screeched. "I never been able to take castor oil. I hate castor oil. It always makes me sick and——"

Before he knew it, Joan had poured a big tablespoonful of the stuff into him, and he made faces that would have scared wild animals.

"In an hour," she said, "I'm going to have you get up and walk around a little bit and see how you feel. There's a possibility that you will notice an improvement so marked that you won't have to go back to bed, but I doubt it."

"I'm ready to get up right now and stay up," Shorty Nolan assured her. "I tell you, I never felt better in my life."

An hour later Joan took his temperature again and then said he'd have to stay in bed all day, all night and all the next day. Shorty roared and fussed and sputtered, but she simply had Hungry fasten him down more securely with additional harness.

Believe me, by noon the next day that little guy was so impatient that he was almost wild.

"That's the most terrible woman I ever met up with," he fumed to me.

"I thought you said she was so gentle," I reminded him.

"I said I thought she was gentle," he corrected me. "Dawg-gone her! This afternoon she's liable to order me to stay in bed another day and night."

"And you got a date to-night with Alberta, haven't you?" I asked.

Shorty scowled. "No; like a big fool I had Hungry call her up yesterday and tell her I was sick. I'm sorry I did it, too. Alberta's just about the sweetest girl I know. Just imagine her jamming a stomach pump into a guy!"

A few minutes later Joan came in with a thermometer.

"If you got any idea of making me swallow another pump or a vacuum cleaner or something" Shorty grumbled at her, "I can tell you now that it ain't in the cards. I'll be derned if I swallow another thing."

"Be extra careful that you don't swal-

low this," the nurse laughed, putting the thermometer into his mouth.

After a while she removed the glass and looked at the mercury.

"I guess now I got indications of whooping cough and the pip, hey?" our convalescent busted out sourly.

"No; on the contrary, you show a very decided improvement, Mr. Nolan," Joan told him sweetly. "You're so much better that I am going to permit you to walk about in the fresh and sunshiny air for an hour. One hour, mind you. Then you must get back to bed. I may be over-apprehensive, but just to play safe I think I shall make a blood test for you to-morrow."

Leaving me to unloosen Shorty's harness, she sauntered out.

"Whoever named them dames 'angels of mercy'?" Shorty sputtered to me. "Gosh! What a crust! She permits me to go out for a hour. She thinks she'll take a blood test. I wonder what else she's got for me to swallow."

Once free and dressed, Shorty ambled over to the ranch house and got permission to use the telephone. I sort of suspected who he was calling up.

Five minutes later he came out briskly and buttonholed me.

"Al, you're a friend of mine," he said. "Do me a favor. Get my best clothes out for me, saddle my horse, and meet me at the gate to the county road. Don't ask me any questions now."

Acting like I was doing it guiltily, I carried out his request.

"Where you headin' for, Shorty?" I inquired as he swung aboard his trusty nag.

"I'm going to see Alberta," he chuckled.

"Yeah, but I heard Slim Evers say at lunch time he had a date with her this evening," I put in.

"He did have," Shorty beamed, "but he had to break it. Poor, dear Mr. Evers! He was took suddenly sick in town this afternoon and telephoned her a little while ago. He's on his way out here now.

"All I'm hoping is that, like the fellow said, it ain't anything trivial. I don't wish him any hard luck—or, at least, an awful lot of hard luck—but I hope he's sick enough to need the care of a right gentle nurse."

WOLVES AT THE DOOR

NOT only has the proverbial wolf been howling at Chicago's door during the past winter but real wolves as well. Three of them, all told, were driven into the States by the severe weather in the North. The wolves were very hungry, and neighboring estates famous for choice cattle suffered many losses. An irate posse of one hundred and eighty-five huntsmen were completely baffled for some time in their search for these prowlers, but after a long chase they finally located the desperate wolves and drove them from cover. They killed two of the wolves but the third escaped, wounded.

The Stingaree

By Max Brand

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

JIMMY GREEN, thirteen, training the husky, Mishe Mukwa, in the woods of Fort Anxious, meets a ragged stranger. Jimmy and the savage dog succumb to the strange charm of "Alabama Joe." The boy proudly introduces Joe to his chum, Mounted Policeman Dyce—to the pleasure of neither. Alabama also meets lovely Paula Carson, twenty, whom Jimmy plans to marry; and Stanley Parker—adopted by Old Man Tyndal—the boy's rival. Parker's bravery in killing Bob Dillman—found robbing the Tyndal safe—has also made him a popular hero. Parker sneeringly suggests that Dillman's pal, The Stingaree, will soon appear—snakes travel in pairs! Alas for Jimmy, Alabama seems to be a coward! The tramp gets a job at Carson's grocery store, with Mishe, whom he has bought with the proceeds of a juggling exhibition. Jimmy overhears Parker ask Paula to marry him and promise to develop her father's failing business. Paula is indifferent. A hand of iron then grasps the eavesdropping Jimmy.

CHAPTER XV.

TWO MEN SHAKE HANDS.

WHEN Jimmy was carried off from that porch, he knew how a rabbit feels when a great horned owl strikes its talons into the soft body and quickly swoops away with it.

He was so helpless that he stopped struggling in an instant. He never had felt such a grip, not even the hand of Awaskees, as it lifted him out of the rapids that unforgetable day when the canoe overturned. He stopped struggling, and he looked helplessly up.

It was a perfect night. There was no water vapor adrift now. It had been congealed as dew, perhaps. The stars freckled all the sky, steadily shining, so that the empty spaces, here and there, looked like great black coal sacks. Far away, some French-Canadians were

singing upon the river an old paddle song, giving it just the proper swing to make paddles drive in an effortless rhythm through the water.

In the nerveless blank of his mind, Jimmy Green noted these things.

Then he was put down under a tree. He was set free. Not even the deadly knife which dripped down from his hand was removed. But he did not attempt to stir.

A cold, wet thing touched his leg. It was the nose of Mishe Mukwa, sniffing him. No, Jimmy did not even dream of fleeing, but stood as if made of stone.

He waited.

So did the tramp.

It seemed to Jimmy, after a few moments of this, and of facing the silence of the big man, that he was growing brittle, freezing, so that the least stroke, the touch of a word would snap his will-power in two.

"Porches," said Alabama Joe, "I always figured out, are dangerous places."

He waited again.

With a great effort, Jimmy cleared his throat.

"There's likely to be a draft on them," he agreed.

"Yes," said the tramp, "there's likely to be a draft on them. Porches are about the worst place in the world for people to sit out."

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"Especially this porch."

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"Especially for boys."

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"How much of that talk did you hear?"

"Not much, Alabama."

"Tell me how much."

"From the time where he told her that they ought to make a plan, to where he promised to fix up the store if her father would take his advice, and spend the money right, and fire you."

"That's the part you heard?" asked Alabama.

"That's all. Except when he left, she was to spend the night thinking things over."

Anger swelled in Jimmy, and it grew to such a high wave that he was able to forget his present danger.

"That's enough," said the tramp. "I don't wish to know what they were talking about; but I'm mighty surprised that an honest boy like you——"

"Dang him!" said Jimmy. "He's no good—I don't like him—he ain't half fit to marry her!"

"What a way," said the soft voice of Alabama, "what a way to talk about the leading young man of Fort Anxious, Jimmy. I'm surprised to hear this from you, Jim!"

"He's—I dunno," said Jimmy lamely. "I just don't like him!"

"Was that why you followed him here to-night?" asked Alabama.

"I didn't follow him," said Jimmy.

"Oh, didn't you? What brought you, then?"

"My legs!" said Jimmy impudently.

Something struck him along the side of the head. Not the open hand of Alabama Joe, surely, but a flexible steel cable. It jumbled his brains and placed a cloud of darkness before him.

He reeled, but he did not fall.

"If you speak like that to me again, I'll wring your neck," said Alabama Joe. "You came spying!"

Jimmy was silent. He was trying to readjust his thoughts, but the spinning of the stars into dim white streaks of fire disturbed him greatly.

"You came to find me," said the tramp.

Still, Jimmy did not speak. He gripped the handle of the knife with all his might, working his fingers a little. If that hand of steel struck at him again, he would strive to duck and hit in for the heart.

Yet he knew that he could not suc-

ceed. The time before, he had not even seen the flash of the hand before he received the blow.

"You came to find me," said Alabama Joe. "You've climbed up to my room!"

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"You saw what?"

"A dummy in the chair."

"Who sent you?"

Jimmy swallowed. He was glad that he had had a chance to talk a little, for it warmed him strangely, and enabled his mind to work more freely.

He felt that he could do something, now, before that terrible hand fastened on his throat, or the long, white teeth of Mishe sank in his flesh. This was the coward whose public shame had made him turn cold with disgust!

"Who sent you?" repeated Alabama Joe.

"No one," said Jimmy.

"You lie!" said the tramp.

He put a thumb into the tender flesh under Jimmy's chin and jerked his head up so short that the very roots of Jimmy's tongue were bruised. At his legs the boy heard the softly indrawn snarl of the wolf dog. But, worse than this, as his head jerked back he found that the face of Joe was close to his, and even the starlight was enough to enable him to see its expression.

It curdled his blood. Once before, out there in the open meadow, he had seen something in this man like eyes in the dark. Now his soul turned to a bird ready for flight.

"Who sent you?" said the tramp. "Dang you, I'll have your heart out if you don't tell me!"

The lips of Jimmy parted. But he found somewhere strength in his sick heart and shut his teeth hard.

"Dyce sent you!" said Alabama Joe.

Again Jimmy struggled. It would be easy to shift the blame, but the lesson of his whole life rallied to him then.

"That's a lie!" said he.

He saw the shadow of the hand raised. He was nerveless and helpless to strike with the knife. So he looked straight back at Alabama Joe and waited for the finish. Not the dog, he hoped. The hands of the man were better than that.

Now, so suddenly that he staggered, he was set free.

"I never saw a gamer one," he heard Alabama Joe saying.

It was a mere mutter, but Jimmy could almost hear the singing of the spheres, at that moment, so acute were his senses.

"Jim," said Alabama Joe, "you came prospecting on your own account, is that it?"

He would have answered, feeling suddenly that he was to be allowed to live, but somehow he could not find words.

"Jim," said the tramp, "I'm a bad one, but I never was as bad as this, before. I hit you, sonny. Here's my face. Whang me back, will you?"

But Jimmy put up the knife he had drawn. He was still very dizzy, and the stars wabbled in the sky.

"Are you done with me, partner?" said the soft voice of Alabama Joe.

Now, that touch of tenderness undid Jimmy Green more than the danger and the terror in which he had stood. He tried to clench his teeth. He tried to shut back the flood of weakness that rushed up into his throat. But, after all, he was not a man, no matter what he thought.

The sobs came violently. He struggled against them, he reduced them to a small, wavering pulse of sound, but he was helpless.

He found himself snatched up.

The dark head of Mishe Mukwa leaped up beside him, with a flash of teeth, but a whisper from the tramp ordered him down. And so Jimmy was borne swiftly away. Thick trees

closed around them. The sky was shut out.

"Now let it go," said Alabama Joe. "If you've got tears inside of you, Jimmy, get rid of 'em. Cry if you have to. You're not a thousand years old, partner."

Again Jimmy struggled, but the low, choked sobs kept coming.

"I'm a dog," said Alabama Joe. "I'm a cur, and a low cur. I wish that you'd hit me across the face with a whip. Jimmy, I'm sick about it. You came to find out about me. I don't blame you. You're a boy, and a boy ought to skirmish on his own account! Jimmy, I'm sick. You want to know about me. Now you ask, and I'll tell you the whole yarn! Jim, what is it that you want, old son?"

"I'm ashamed," said Jim. "I'm most terrible ashamed, and I've——"

He mastered himself, dragging in great breaths.

"You saw the dummy in my room. But you saw it on your own hook. Nobody paid you to spy on me?"

"No," said Jimmy.

"I'd trust you to the end of time," said Alabama. "You can know whatever you please about me. Ask me, Jimmy!"

"I don't want to ask you," said Jimmy, gathering himself more and more.

"Will you forgive me, son?"

"I will," said Jimmy. "You caught me spying—you had a right——"

"To cane you, yes. Maybe. But not to use my hand on you—Jim, I'm a dog! You're the gamest, the straightest, the finest lad I ever found. Jim, I'd rather have you respecting me than ten thousand good voting citizens. Will you give me your hand?"

"D'you mean it, really and truly, Alabama?"

"I mean it."

The hand of Jimmy went out. It was taken in a careful but a mighty grip, soft as the hand of a woman, but prodigiously strong.

"I want you to know what you came to find out. I wanta introduce myself, Jim. I'm the Stingaree!"

CHAPTER XVI.

JIMMY GETS INFORMATION AND ADVICE.

IT was that same day that he had heard the name for the first time, but somehow it had gone deeply into his imagination.

"I don't wanta hear your name!" cried Jimmy, clapping his hands over his ears too late.

For all the implications rushed over his mind at once. In the first place, he was bound by a pledged confidence and by the trust of the other to reveal nothing that he learned at this talk. In the second place, he could see exactly what was the course of the action to be: The Stingaree had come all this distance to the north in order to avenge the death of Bob Dillman, his old associate. For that reason he had asked all the questions about the killing of his old companion. Stanley Parker would have to die!

Not long before, Jimmy had been feeling that there was not a life which he would more willingly spare than that of Stanley Parker, but he suddenly thought of the handsome face, the good reputation, the industry, and the patient labor of Stanley Parker, to say nothing of that glorious killing of Bob Dillman, the gunman and yegg by profession.

What could he do?

He could not reveal to Charlie Dyce what he had learned about the tramp. That would simply mean jail—perhaps the hangman's rope for Stingaree. Could Stanley Parker defend himself? Nobody, the boy was convinced, could stand for a moment against this man of mystery.

"You don't want to hear my name," said the tramp. "You've got reason,

Jimmy. It's a bad name, and a black name, but I'd trust you with anything I know!"

"You've come here to murder Stanley Parker!" said the boy, panting. In the dark of the night that word painted its own picture before his eyes.

"It's hard to call it murder. Justice is what I've come with!" said the tramp.

"Justice!" said the boy. "You're gunna kill him, Joe!"

"Does he deserve to live?" asked the Stingaree bitterly. "He murdered Bob Dillman!"

"That was a fair fight. He didn't even have a gun!"

"Meaning, according to that yarn, that he took the gun away from Bobbie and then slaughtered him with it?"

"Isn't that what happened?"

"Listen, sonny," said the tramp. "Will you listen to me?"

"Sure, Joe."

"Stingaree is my right nickname."

"It sort of scares me to use it, though!"

"I knew Bob Dillman all my life since I was a kid younger than you. I was the boss of our town until Bobbie came along. We fought every night after school for a month. I never could lick him until he hit his head on a rock by luck—something the way that Larkin did to-day. I never licked him after that—we never fought. But Bobbie Dillman was more dangerous in a fight than any snake. He was quick as a wasp, and the sort of poison he carried, killed on the spot. He was a killer," said the Stingaree, with an odd touch of pride in his voice.

"A killer!" echoed Jimmy Green, turning a little faint again.

"He had eighteen men on his list," said the Stingaree.

"And how many have you got, Stingaree?"

"Me? Nothing to speak of, sonny. Nothing to speak of. Sometimes I've had to get out of a trap—but bullets knee-high are nearly as good as bullets through the heart. The other fellow may be keen on shooting, but he generally shoots a little wild after his blood has started running. But that Dillman, he loved a fight for the sake of the fighting. There was nothing he liked better than to hear of a fellow who was going to clean up a district. Dillman would travel a thousand miles to eat a fellow like that. They sent Cruikshank down to make the River as clean as a Dutch doorstep. Bobbie was clear out in Philadelphia, then. He waited two weeks to hear that Cruikshank had been killed; then he got impatient, jumped West, and did the job himself.

"Three men walked in on Bobbie one day when he was playing poker. They wanted him, and they wanted him bad. They came in from behind. But they didn't get him. One of them he shot through the shoulder, another through the stomach—he didn't die, somehow—and the third man got down and begged, and Bobbie turned him loose.

"Now, Jimmy, do you see the point that I make?"

"That he was a terrible dangerous man, Joe?"

"That his gun never was taken from him. Not even when he was asleep."

"But Stanley Parker got it!"

"Then it was given to him!"

Jimmy gasped. "I don't understand it at all!" said he.

"Double crossing is all I mean," said Stingaree slowly. "Suppose he was behind—needed a little cash for something—went partners with Dillman, and while the cracking of that safe went on, Parker stood guard armed with Dillman's gun. Now do you see? It suddenly occurs to him that he has a chance to make a great name for himself, hypnotize Tyndal into making him his son and heir, or at the least to pose as a hero. So he speaks to Bobbie, and when Bobbie looks up, he shoots him fair between the eyes. A good,

cool, determined man, that fellow Parker. Otherwise, he would have tried for the body, and he would have shot more than once. I grant that Parker is a rare one, and that he gets what he's after. But the way that he got Dillman's gun was by a gift! D'you wonder that I'm here to square the thing up, Jimmy?"

There might have been other explanations, but Jimmy, as he listened, could think of none. He could see the picture of the deed; he could see Bob Dillman looking up suddenly from his work, with the wealth of the safe spread out before him, glorying in it. He could hear the very *crack* of the gun, and the sound of the robber slumping loosely to the floor.

He had no doubt but that big Alabama Joe was right. Yet he struggled against the inevitable. He said:

"Joe, you ought to leave it to the law. It's really not your business to kill Parker."

"The law!" said Stingaree.

He laughed a little.

"The law!" he repeated. "It only sees where it wants to see. It's an owl. It flies in the dark. It hits when you're not looking. It wiped me out. I was straight. You hear me, Jimmy? I was straight as a string. I walked the chalked line. Nobody had anything against me. The crooks got at me. I had the goods on them, enough to convince any jury. But they dodged me in the law. They tied my hands. Should I sit down and cry? No, I stepped out and got my own back with a gun!"

"But Dillman," said the boy, panting as he talked, for he felt that he was arguing for a life. "Dillman was a crook. You admitted that, Stingaree."

The Stingaree answered with emotion:

"He was my partner, Jimmy. What do I care what he did to other people? He was straight to me. Twice he opened steel bars and cracked toolproof steel jails like sardine cans to set me loose. He staked me when I was broke. He gave me his coat in the cold, and he gave me his share of water in the desert. His gun was my gun. His fights were my fights. He stole for me, begged for me, lied for me, fought for me. And now he's waiting out in the dark to see how I'll settle the account."

Jimmy Green argued no longer, for he saw that words were useless.

"Stingaree," said he, "it's a terrible thing—murder!"

"No, no, Jimmy," answered the other. "I've never taken a man behind. I won't start in with Parker. He'll have his equal break. Is there any pleasure in dropping him in cold blood? No, Jim, but in telling him what's coming, and letting him play his hand for the sake of the money, the big reputation, and the girl! He's got enough to make him fight. He's brave enough to fight. And he can shoot straight. No, no—not murder, Jimmy!"

But he purred as he spoke, like a great, contented cat—it could not be called laughter that Jimmy was hearing.

And Jimmy could not speak. In fact, there was no answer to make, except to say:

"Will you be able to make him fight you?"

"Oh, there are ways of stinging any rat until it feels it's cornered and strikes back. I'll find the way to sting Stanley Parker!"

And Jimmy could not help believing that the other would live up to his word.

"What shall I do?" said Jimmy, groaning in his quandary. "Why did you tell me, Stingaree? Why did you put it on me? I'd rather you'd have wrung my neck, pretty near!"

"Because I wouldn't leave you out in the dark, Jimmy. Because you've been

a partner to me here in Fort Anxious. That's why. You don't have to sneak around in the dark to find out what you want to know about me. Come and ask me straight out!"

They walked out from the trees.

"Good night, Jimmy," said Alabama Joe.

"So long, Stingaree," said the boy soberly.

They shook hands, and again the soft palm of the Stingaree seemed to the boy like the velvet touch of a cat's paw.

No further questions—no asking of pledges of silence—no taking of oaths—but all was left to the honor of Jimmy Green. That honor was bright as the moon!

He saw Stingaree leave, melting suddenly in the dark of the night. Then going a little closer to the house, he watched a shadow pass up its wall. Only for an instant was there a dim and bulky outline against the lamplight from the window of Alabama Joe's room. Then this form disappeared, and the lamp itself was put out.

Jimmy Green turned slowly; slowly he started back up the street, not even wondering where he should spend the night, when a form rose out of the brush, and a man with a long, light stride came up beside him.

Jimmy was not frightened. He had been through so much that day and night that a star could have exploded in the sky without making him so much as blink.

"Well, Jim," said the voice of Charlie Dyce beside him, "you're a regular owl. A late walker!"

"Yeah?" said Jimmy, uninterested.

"Jim," went on the other, "I've got this much to say to you. Partnerships are good things—if you get the right partner! That's all. So long!"

He went out through the dark, and Jimmy stared heavily after him. How much had Charlie Dyce heard, if anything? Something he certainly had seen!

But he went on, grimly shaking his head. His lips were sealed. Neither in Dyce nor in the Stingaree could he confide!

CHAPTER XVII.

SALESMANSHIP.

ALL of Fort Anxious began going to the grocery store of Bill Carson. They came in droves. They came to see the big dog, Mishe Mukwa, lying in the window, with his forepaws crossed, and his eyes constantly following his master about the shop. It was said that Kite Larkin had accepted two hundred dollars for the dog from the tramp, and that Alabama Joe had raised the money by his evening exhibitions of juggling in the street. At any rate, Mishe accepted his new master with a great devotion. Everywhere, he followed the stranger, or lay at his feet and guarded them with a savage affection; only in the store could he be induced to lie on the shelf, merely snarling silently when he saw the crowd near Alabama.

The crowd came to see Mishe Mukwa, but still more it came to see Alabama Joe, now a full-fledged clerk in Carson's store. He had a word for every one. He seemed to know every name in Fort Anxious. He began to talk broken French-Canadian to the Canucks; he even grunted a few words of Cree to the Indians. And every one came, every one lingered a little. It was like a perpetual sale, in the Carson store. There were always purchasers; there were always spectators pressed back against the walls. Maker & Webb's store had no patrons, now! As for Bill Carson, he and his daughter were busy bringing and wrapping, but the new clerk did the selling and the delivering, and every night old Carson stood for a time, rapt, and stared at the heaps of coin that made his cash drawer heavy.

Jimmy Green came with others to the store, when he could snatch a moment from his other affairs. His dignity now towered higher than ever. For he had brought Alabama Joe to Fort Anxious and was known to be the confidant and the closest friend of the big fellow.

So, on this morning, Jimmy sat on the window ledge beside Mishe Mukwa. The dog did not love him, but at least he had been induced to accept Jimmy's presence without anger; so Jimmy sat there with his hand in the bristling mane of the big fellow and watched the crowd, and Alabama Joe.

Three trappers had come in, all of them looking for knives.

"The famous thinking knives of Bill Carson," said Alabama Joe. "You couldn't have come to a better shop." He took out a tray of them. "Always ready to your hand. Always anxious to serve. The famous 'thinking knives' of Bill Carson! Take your pick, gents."

Three knives spun up into the air, and whirling down, lodged their points solidly in the face of the counter and stood there humming like three angry wasps. No other knives could even have been given to the trappers, after that. They took them out and thumbed the steel and swore it was a finer edge than they ever had seen before. They bent them at the point and swore it was the true temper. They went away delighted.

Mrs. Jim Graham came in for laundry soap.

"It does the work for you," said Alabama Joe, bringing out some yellow cakes. "You turn out a laundry with this soap, ma'am, and it hurts the neighbors' eyes. Socks get bigger when you wash them with this soap. It's the kind of soap that the queens and the duchesses always use themselves for their handkerchiefs. 'Duchess,' says the queen, 'I never saw your handkerchiefs looking so white.'

"'Use Young's Yellow Peril,' says the duchess.

"'Thanks terribly,' says the queen.

"'Not at all, ma'am,' says the duchess. 'Wonderful for the baby's tub, too. Makes cheeks you want to pinch.'

"Nothing but Young's Yellow Peril inside royal palaces, Mrs. Graham. How's Jim?"

He kept talking constantly, not loudly, but rather in a friendly, confidential manner, and people doubled their purchases to hear more of his nonsense.

"Old 'Ding' Vincent came in.

"Have you got some honey?" said he.

"I have some honey," replied Alabama Joe. "Yes, sir, I have some honey what am. The only thing is—Do you keep bees, Ding?"

"Me? Why the heck should I keep bees?" asked Ding Vincent, wagging his beard as he shifted his quid.

"A good thing you don't," replied the salesman. "You take this honey we carry—when bees get a whiff of it they crowd around for a day or two and try to steal it, and failing that, they get downhearted. Their own honey don't taste so good to them, afterward. Seems moldy, and made out of glucose instead of meadow flowers, Ding. The grubs in the hive get the same taste. Along comes a nurse staggering with her arms full of food. The grubs holler out: 'Is that Anderson's Amber?'

"'No,' says the nurse. 'Just out of it, to-day.'

"'Then take that stuff away,' says the grub. 'Anderson's or nothing, say I.'

"You get a spoiled hive in no time, Ding. Those bees work like sixty for a while, but the old honey doesn't seem right. The flowers are no good. Those old bees begin to sit around and mope. They begin to feel that they never had the right start. First thing, they're dead. That's why I always hate to sell

this honey to a beekeeper, Ding; but seeing that you don't keep them, here you are. You better take six bottles of it while they last."

"Young feller," said Ding, "don't this here bottle say 'imitation' right here on the label in small print? And ain't that why the dog-gone no-good stuff is so cheap?"

"Ding," said the clerk, "I'll tell you what it is. It's modesty, Ding. Anderson knows he's got the best honey in the world. But does he want to crowd out all his competitors? No. He's a Christian, is Anderson. He believes in living and letting live. And that's why he puts 'imitation' on the labels."

"Gimme half a dozen bottles," said Ding. "You'd make cats vote for dogs for the town council, young man."

Down the river, the whistle of the lumber mill hooted like a great hunting owl; it was twelve o'clock, and the crowd in the store rapidly melted away. Only the two Carsons, Alabama, and Jimmy Green remained.

Bill Carson sat down with a grunt of weariness on an apple box.

"I gotta get in a new stock," said he. "I'm getting cleaned out. The boat oughta be up the river to the landing by next Wednesday, but I dunno that we can hold out that long. It's like a run on a bank; and there ain't any need of makin' everybody buy six of ever'-thing, Alabama! It's a fool way, when the stock is nigh washed out of the cellar, and the attic, too!"

Paula Carson slumped into a chair, utterly tired out, and big Alabama Joe sat on the counter beside her, swinging his heels, and fanning her with the cardboard top of a big carton which he had torn off.

"Maker & Webb are dying of starvation," said he. "Jud Maker has taken in his belt five notches, and Harry Maker is wearing clothes that he sprang the seams of ten years ago. Sally Maker has started going to church to practice up praying, and Jessica Webb is ready to take in washing. Hang on a little while, Carson, and they'll move out of town, and then you can raise your prices all around and get as rich as Crœsus!"

Bill Carson listened with popping eyes.

"When I listen to you, young feller," he said, "I never can tell when you're advisin' me and when you're laughin' at me. The bees quit when they smell Anderson's Amber! Sure they quit! That stuff to be called honey!"

"Mind rules matter, you know," said the tramp.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"I read it on a poster. Paula, if I go to the dance to-night, d'you dare to dance once with me? Or will Stanley Parker let you?"

She looked in alarm toward the door and sighed with relief when she saw it was empty.

"Are you ashamed?" she asked him, flushing a little.

"I'm not," he answered. "I have a new suit. I bought it at the store yesterday. It's a little quick around the shoulders, and it'll show my cuffs, but that's fashionable. I've got an iron collar, too, and I've written the words on it."

"What words?" she asked him, smiling a little.

"'His name is Alabama Joe. If found straying, please return to Paula Carson, Fort Anxious. Not valuable, but we love him.' That's what I've written, Paula."

"Hum!" said Bill Carson. "What kinda rot you talkin' now? The pair of you!"

"Are you going to the dance?" asked Paula.

"I am," said Alabama.

"Stanley Parker has my card," said she. "I think he's had the dances all filled on it."

"Which one with me?" asked Alabama Joe.

"I don't know," said the girl. "I hope that there'll be a place——"

"There will," said he. "You can make your choice. Waltz, two-step, or schottische. I've had a medal for two-stepping, Paula, and when I waltz you don't need music. But the schottische is my main hold, Paula. Slow and dreamy is my style, and every girl thinks she's Cinderella. You'd better ask for a schottische. I've still got a few left."

"What girl are you taking?" said she.

"I haven't read over the waiting list," said he. "But I favor the red-haired girl, that Carlotta."

"She has a squint," said Paula Carson.

"Has she? Then there's Marie Dugommier. She's always smiled at me since I pulled the knife out of her mother's ear."

"Poor, dear, Marie never has any clothes."

"Kindness is what I want," said he, "and small feet."

"You can't talk French," said she.

"That will leave more time for dancing. Shall I take Marie?"

"You're the judge," Paula answered, and Jimmy saw her head go up a little. "I don't have to dance with her."

"But we'll be sitting next to you and Parker," he replied.

She started. "How do you know that?"

"I'll put a bet on it, Paula."

She started up suddenly.

"It's time for lunch!" she said sharply. "Jimmy, are you coming with us?"

He followed, trailing far behind, very thoughtful.

He could guess that there would be excitement at that dance. Tragedy, perhaps? For the Stingaree would not wait much longer. Charlie Dyce was absent from the town and certainly Alabama Joe knew that the policeman had not left on a pleasure trip. At any rate, Jimmy decided that he would be present at that dance, no matter how hard it might be to climb to a window.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOOKING INTO SOCIETY.

WHATEVER faults Stingaree found with his dress that night, Jimmy Green could think of none. For Alabama Joe had on a good suit of blue serge, and if it were not exactly ample, it showed off all the better the ponderous width of his shoulders and the crease down the center of his back. This to Jimmy seemed perfection in a coat. He was in the room of the Stingaree, watching him get ready for the dance, and admiring, finally, the white flower which the man put in his buttonhole to complete his attire.

"You look mighty slick, Joe," he declared.

"Do I?" said the Stingaree. "This is a mighty bother, though!"

He took from the bureau drawer a revolver, and the eyes of Jimmy grew round as he looked at it. It had a long barrel, an obviously custom-made stock, and it possessed neither sight, trigger, nor trigger guard. It was single-action veteran, prepared for fanning and fanning alone. This weighty gun the Stingaree thoughtfully dangled and spun upon his finger tips. He opened the flaps of his coat, he shrugged his shoulders, and at last, taking off the coat again, he strapped around his left shoulder a small spring clip which hung under the left armpit. Into this he fitted the weapon, complaining:

"Now I'll have to be talking and gesturing all evening, Jimmy. Enough to make a man hot even to think of."

"D'you have to have it?" asked Jimmy faintly.

"I'd feel undressed without it," said

the Stingaree. "I wouldn't be at home in my own house!"

But Jimmy could not help guessing that the great moment was almost here when the Stingaree was to be seen in action. Somehow, he dared not ask a more pointed question. He saw Stingaree leave the room. He followed him and the big dog down the stairs, and watched the tying of Mishe Mukwa to the end of a strong chain. Then Alabama Joe went to find Marie Dugommier, and Jimmy Green started for the dance hall.

He had planned the maneuvers he would execute with the greatest care. The dance hall was simply the second floor of what had once been a big barn. The constant rubbing of the hay had given to the flooring a natural polish which was enhanced for a celebration by dragging a bale of hay about, after powdering the planks with wax. It made a good dance floor. It made a spacious place for all the couples that Fort Anxious could send out to a dance. The building had been bought up by public subscription. On the ground floor there were two stores. The rent of these kept the whole place going. And so the upper floor was free for dances, meetings, speeches, entertainments of all kinds.

Jimmy, to approach the barn, went around behind it. There was a huge pine tree growing there, bending over at a slant so distinct that its top leaned over the roof. Up to that top Jimmy went, and getting out on the perilous tip of a branch, it lowered him softly to the roof. He watched the branch jump up with a swish high above his head. It was easy to get here, but retreat would not be so simple.

His next advance was more precarious. He had to lie out on the rotten gutter of the eaves. The tin work and the wood groaned and ripped under his weight, but he was able to look over and find what he wanted. This was a fragment of an old ladder which went up the side of the barn.

By his toes he hung from the creaking, sagging eaves, and the trees and the street swung beneath him until he got a handhold on the ladder and came down on its length with a great jerk. He felt the ladder give; there was the screech of a rusted nail pulling. For one instant his heart leaped, and then he was at ease, for the ladder held admirably well, and he blessed the good, stout, old-fashioned nails which had been used to fasten it.

Having risked his neck at least twice already, he thought nothing now of passing from the ladder down to the level of the second-story windows and there crawling hand over hand along a meager ridge on the side of the building.

He gained in this manner the front of the corner window. It was shuttered some three feet above the floor, and outside of the shutter was a shallow iron framework which left just room enough for Jimmy to accommodate himself between. He did not need to rise up and look over the shutters. He could simply sit there in a good deal of comfort and through the crevices of the shutters he was able to see and hear all the hall except for a couple of the most distant corners.

There was enough to fill his eye, however.

He thought that he never had seen anything so wonderful as the transformation in both men and women. Taken singly, in the street, as he had seen them before many a time, the woodsmen and the trappers looked clumsy, their clothes too small, their faces exceedingly tanned, and their hands burly and unshapen. But in the mass, it was different. The light of three big clusters of oil lamps illumined the crowd. It made the young men seem like Apollos to Jimmy. And as for the girls, they fairly dazzled him. The

very rustling of their dresses was enough to make a heart leap. And they wore special smiles which never came off.

They were always rushing up and kissing one another, and holding hands, and standing back at arm's length to look one another over and admire the beautiful pink organdy, and the lovely ruffles, and how charming she looked in it, and so did you, until Jimmy's eyes started from his head, and he decided that girls, after all, were simply a species of angel, and not the inferior creatures which he always had suspected. He fell into a melting mood, as he made this decision. The young men were handsome. In their shining boots, throttled by the high choking collars, and resplendent in gorgeous neckties, they far outshone anything that Jimmy ever had conceived. But the women—they had a breath of fragrance about them—they brought an authentic note of heaven into the barn. Hereafter, his imaginings would be furnished with wings.

While Jimmy was making up his mind about these things, and looking, with his heart knocking at his very teeth, old Mrs. Chris Muller and her daughter Helena took their stand just before the window, so that Jimmy grew dizzy and his neck ached from ducking to one side and then to the other in an effort to look past them.

"I never seen anything like the way that things are coming to!" said Mrs. Chris Muller.

"It's pretty terrible, all right," said Helena.

She shook her chin as she answered, and her second chin redoubled the negative. Of the real chin, there was not much; for Helena's face slid by easy stages and imperceptibly into her round, fat, shining neck. Her face did not begin to form an angle until it reached the line of her upper teeth, which projected in a massive, dazzling row. Helena always looked cheerful, because she could not help smiling.

"Lookit that Judith Crane, the creature," said Mrs. Muller.

"Yeah. Lookit!" said Helena. "I never seen such a fright!"

"She ain't got any forehead!" said Mrs. Muller.

"No, she ain't," said Helena. "Ain't she proud of herself, though?"

"Yeah," said the mother. "I never seen nothin' like. The way she carries on with that poor Chester boy, somebody'd oughta do something about it."

"There's Flo Lawrence," said Helena. "She's got a lovely smile, ma."

"There ain't but one real smile in this room," said Mrs. Muller, with a resolute movement of her shoulders, "and there ain't but one set of teeth, neither."

Helena's smile widened unbelievably. Jimmy did not see how one mouth could hold so much.

"They take a lotta care, teeth," said Helena.

"Yeah. They're worth it. You got something to show for your work. You oughta thank God for it, child."

"Yeah," said Helena. "I guess that I'd oughta."

Jimmy sighed. Even girls at a dance were not altogether perfect, it appeared. But then, Helena was an exception. She was the ugly duckling.

Helena and her mother passed on, only pausing to embrace Flo Lawrence. Flo was pretty and petite. She had great big blue eyes, and she had a way of lifting them up the front of a man's coat, button by button, until at last she dawned on him like a sunrise sky. She was dawning, just now, on young Chester, and he was staggered with the beginning of each day!

"Look at that poor Helena Muller!" said sweet little Flo. "She's got a mouthful, ain't she?"

"Yeah," said Chester, "she's gotta half dozen eggs in her mouth. I guess."

Chester drifted away. Angular Lilian Bayne came to the side of Flo.

"Lookit, Flo!" said she.

"Yeah?" queried Flo.

"Lookit Sis Taylor."

"Ain't I been seein' her, though?"

"Lookit her dress, will ya?"

"Yeah. It's three inches over her ankles, I guess."

"She don't want nobody to miss nothing."

"She might as well show her knees," said Flo.

"Well, lookit the way she was raised."

"Yeah, lookit. Dragged up."

Now, it happened that Sis Taylor was neither beautiful nor pretending to beauty. She was one of the few girls in Fort Anxious that Jimmy had been able to see since the great bright cloud of pretty Paula Carson filled his eyes. But Sis was a good fellow, a straight-from-the-shoulder puncher, a grand girl with an ax at a woodpile, and a fine hand in the kitchen. She laughed like a man.

At this very moment she laughed.

"Lookit!" said dainty little Flo. "Lookit the way she sticks out her stummick and stands on her heels."

Tall Lilian Bayne drew back her head. Her head was so small and her Adam's apple was so large that this movement gave her a silhouette like a camel.

"Whadja expect from a girl raised in a back yard?" she asked. "Lookit the skirt of her, though!"

And Jimmy sighed again. He knew that the reason the skirt of poor Sis Taylor was short was because it had shrunk. Had she not informed the whole storeful of people of that fact this very morning? But what could she do, when she had only one dress to wear? Jimmy grew hot and scornful.

"Lookit!" said Flo. "There's Marie Dugommier lookin' like a house on fire and—lookit! She's got—the *tramp!*"

CHAPTER XIX.

TAG!

THERE are limits which, say what one may, should not be passed.

To criticize every girl in Fort Anxious—except one—that was all very well. But to lay tongue upon the Stingaree was a different matter, or upon the girl he honored by asking to a dance! It was impeaching faultless taste.

Jimmy craned his neck until it grew brittle. A tap would have broken it off short, like a stick of taffy candy.

Marie Dugommier came in laughing. Girls always came in laughing, for that matter. He could see them in the door take a breath and grit their teeth, so to speak, and then start their laughter as though they were coming onto a stage. As though they had heard some recent brilliant remark from their escort, or as if—perhaps—there were a great many things around them worthy of nothing but laughter. But Marie Dugommier laughed in a different manner. She laughed, Jimmy felt, from her very toes. She had a hand shamelessly tucked inside the big forearm of the Stingaree. She was looking not around her, but up at him. A strange and delightful thing. A new manner of acting in Fort Anxious. As though she actually thought her escort might be a little better than a worm!

"Lookit her! Crazy about him!" said Flo.

"It ain't none of my business," said Lilian Bayne. "Only I don't admire his taste none too much."

"That's the same dress she wore last year. Whadja think of that!"

"I dunno. Only, I wouldn't be seen if I couldn't look better'n a beggar, a little bit."

"Nor neither would I. Ain't he big though!"

"Yeah. He's big, all right. They say he's a common tramp."

"Yeah. Think of comin' to a dance with a tramp! You been to the store?"

"Yeah. He can talk, all right."

"I never heard nothing like it. I pretty near died."

"Bill Carson has pretty near got rich, they say. The old cheat! Lookit! He's got a white flower in his buttonhole."

"He's wearin' a flower, like a girl. Think of that! I wonder Marie don't make him take it out!"

"She's so dizzy about her tramp that she don't see nothin'."

"It kind of looks swell, though, don't it?"

"Yeah. It kind of looks swell. He ain't a sissy, either."

"He's a terrible coward."

"Something terrible. Here they come! Say, there's Paula Carson and Stanley Parker!"

"D'ye think it's true?"

"What?"

"What everybody's sayin'."

"That they're engaged?"

"Yeah,"

"I hope it ain't. He could do better than a grocer's daughter, I guess."

"I guess that he could. He's gunna be rich."

"Kind of too bad, ain't it? She dunno how to dress!"

"Well, I dunno. Some think she's awful pretty."

"With that nose?"

"That's what I always thought. It needs stretchin'."

Jimmy gritted his teeth. Were all women evil-minded?

"Lookit Stanley Parker's clothes. They say they came all the way from Montreal."

"Whadja think of that! Montreal! He could be a dook—the look of him. He's all wrapped up in a grocer's daughter. It's a pity."

"Well, you take when a girl makes a dead set at a fellow, he ain't got much chance to get away!"

Jimmy wanted to shout out what he knew about that "dead set." He quivered with the intensity of partisan fervor.

But, in the meantime, pretty Marie Dugommier came up, and the tone of the talk altered. The two embraced her with fervor.

It was now:

"Hul-lo, M'ree! How perfectly sweet you look! Nothin' here to-night like you, M'ree. Perfectly lovely dress! Oh, is it? I never would've guessed! Looks better'n new. Me, I like a dress I'm used to. It sort of makes you feel at home."

They drifted away, and the boy outside the window bit his lip with venomous anger. He would remember the pair of them—the wild cats!

But now, dazzling to his eyes, the main actors of the drama—so far as Jimmy was concerned—came to his very window, and sat in the chairs beside it. Stanley Parker, tall and stately, aware of other people in the room only by side glances, and Paula Carson with him; and then the tramp, and Marie Dugommier. In four chairs, side by side they sat. Mr. Parker had taken his place first, with Paula, when the others came up, and he turned pink. Jimmy could guess that he would gladly have changed to more distinguished neighbors.

But the two girls began to talk in a rapid chatter, nodding and laughing together. They seemed great friends. Dimly, Jimmy remembered certain speeches of detraction which Paula had made about the other that very day. He sighed. There was a universal taint, it appeared, that spread through the entire sex. Even Paula did not escape from it!

Mr. Stanley Parker and his partner sat out the first dance, and in spite of the music, and the bustling of dresses, and the scrape and whispering of many feet raking the floor, Jimmy could hear

Parker laying down the law. He did it with a smile, but the smile was as cold as ice. It was disgraceful that a common tramp should be allowed to sit with the respectable members of a community. He hoped that she would speak to her father about this affair. That should be his cue to discharge the reprobate instantly!

And Paula? She listened with a downward head, speaking so softly a word, now and then, that even the keen ear of Jimmy could not make it out.

They went off in the next dance together. Jimmy almost forgot the trouble in the air as he watched the strange process of this dancing, seeing men and women swirl in a great pool of which the music made the waves. He could not see much head or tail to it, except when he saw Paula's face. Oh, hypocrisy in women! He knew that she was miserable. But she maintained the brightest of smiles.

The hall was growing crowded, now. Jimmy saw nearly all of the young men and girls of the town. There were even some who rarely appeared, and among these were the Lafitte brothers. They must have learned that Mounted Policeman Charlie Dyce had gone out from Fort Anxious again, or surely they never would have dared to show their faces.

They had records, the Lafitte brothers. They had compiled part of their records with guns, and part with knives. They were equally at home with both. They were pleasant-looking fellows, sleek, smooth, ready to smile. They could afford to be good-natured, people said, because they never worked! Here they were, floating through the crowd, picking up a dance here and there. But Jimmy noticed that when one of them danced the other remained in an obscure corner, from which he looked out warily, like a bird of prey.

The breath of Jimmy came fast and short. Sometimes he looked at the swirl of the dancers in general, and sometimes he picked out the forms of the Stingaree and of big Stanley Parker.

What would happen?

It came in a tag dance, the beginning.

It was all so casual that the boy hardly noticed, at first. He never had watched such a dance before, and he hardly understood, for a little, why it was that men gave up their partners when another man stepped out from the wall and tapped them on the shoulder. But he saw that through all the confusion of changes, Paula and Stanley Parker sailed around the room undisturbed. It was really a great tribute in that free-for-all region, that the pair should go undisturbed. She was the prettiest girl on the floor. The most prejudiced eye would have admitted this. But no man stepped out to trouble Parker. And it was most apparent that all men in Fort Anxious were aware of the deeds of Tyndal's young heir. Of his deeds in the past, and of his influence in the years to come, beyond doubt.

And then Jimmy saw the big shoulders of the Stingaree coming through the crowd. Others might hesitate to bother Stanley Parker, but from the first moment, Jimmy had not the slightest doubt as to what would happen. The Stingaree was bent on taking Paula for at least a part of that dance.

So through the crowd he came, stepping lightly, gracefully, and reaching the pair as they spun by, he touched the shoulder of Parker.

Others saw it, too. Jimmy could spot the little look of wonder on the faces of many of the dancers, and instinctively they fanned back from Paula and her partner.

But they could be still more amazed to see that Stanley Parker did not give up Paula and step back from her. Instead, he went straight onward in the dance.

As for the Stingaree, he remained where he had been after first tagging Tyndal's heir. He stood there without apparent embarrassment, smiling about him, nodding here and there as acquaintances passed him; while Parker and Paula came by the near side of the room and Jimmy could see the frozen smile of the big man, and his concealed anger. He could almost read the mind of Stanley Parker.

A tramp had tagged his partner!

The whole room buzzed with it in a subdued fashion. And on they had to go, carried by the course of the dance like twigs on a whirlpool. They went by Alabama Joe again, and again he stepped a little forward and distinctly was seen to tap firmly on the shoulder of Parker.

But again the girl was not given to him!

Half the dancers sat down at once. Such an affair as this was a shooting matter; it was also a scene to be watched in security and quiet. But Stanley Parker, for a third time, circled the room with Paula Carson, and again he approached the spot where the big tramp stood at his ease, with the course of the dancers flowing about him on either hand. He stood like a rock, except that he was so excessively amiable.

For the third time he reached forth his hand, and this time Stanley Parker paused.

He was very angry. When one has been a great man in a small community for a little while, perhaps authority goes to the head.

At any rate, Parker had been holding in so long that he simply could not contain himself for another single moment.

His very voice escaped too loudly, and every person on that floor could hear him say:

"You danged loafer, get off the floor!"

CHAPTER XX.

A DOG HAS HIS DAY.

FREE speech is the right of every man, and Fort Anxious was freer in this particular than almost any other place, but this was a little too much.

Jimmy felt a distinct freezing sensation, which passed upward from his spinal marrow to his brain.

However, there was no gun play.

The Stingaree simply was seen to bow, and as the dance ended at this moment, he came straight back toward the window, where pretty Marie Dugommier had been returned to her chair.

He stopped in front of her.

"Marie," said he, "I've been ordered off the floor. I wonder if you think that I should take you home now?"

Jimmy Green bit his lip in vast excitement. What would she say?

But she saw no more than others had seen. That the tramp was a coward, as he had demonstrated before in Fort Anxious. She simply tilted her head back a little. Her face was pale, but very set.

"You can do as you please," said she. "I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in the dance!"

It was even worse, in a way, than what Stingaree had taken from Parker. He took it, moreover, in exactly the same way. That is to say, he bowed to her, and this time he said: "Good night!" in the clearest and the most pleasant way, and then remained for a moment to say that he was sorry that he was forced to leave her, but he felt that authority ought to be obeyed by strangers in a new town.

Marie Dugommier kept her head high. She answered not a word, but looked straight through her escort, and Stingaree walked slowly from the room.

As he went, what a buzz went up!

There was only one important thing

in the eye of Jimmy Green, however, and that was the consummate ease of Alabama Joe. He was so far from being embarrassed that he could turn his head from side to side and, in his smiling way, mark down every face as he crossed the floor.

Alabama passed big Stanley Parker, too, coming toward the same corner which he had just left. Parker looked red and angry, and was very stiff in his walk. He had the air of a man who has done a very virtuous thing and doesn't care what the world thinks of it.

Passing him, the tramp was seen to pause for an instant, and say something, which Parker answered harshly, jerking his head over his shoulder.

Then Paula and her partner came on to the corner. She was white as could be. Jimmy heard her say:

"Stanley, I don't want you to go!"

"Be bearded by a scoundrel of a tramp? He wants the credit of having asked me out of the hall to meet him! I'll meet him! I'll——"

He swallowed the last words of his threat.

Paula Carson, regardless of the crowd, took him by both arms and held him an instant.

"Stanley," said she, "I don't want you to go!"

How wonderfully his face softened as he looked down to her!

"Are you really caring, Paula?" he asked her.

"He's dangerous!" said she.

"Paula," he insisted. "Do you care?"

"I'd care about any man!" said she.

He shrugged his shoulders and stiffened like a ramrod.

"I've got to see what he wants!" said he, and turned on his heel.

Jimmy turned, also.

He had no easy floor to cross, and stairs to descend.

He had to get down from that precarious eagles' nest of his with nothing but thin air under him, most of the time, and the most meager of finger-tip purchases on the way down; but he managed it and in his excitement hardly realized that he had done a dangerous thing.

He got to the ground, hesitated a part of a second to draw his breath, and then bolted for the front of the barn.

There was a crowd there before him, and that crowd was constantly added to by the numbers of people who boiled out from the door of the dance hall. Their footfalls could be heard hurriedly tapping down the stairs and then crunching on the gravel as they came out from the entrance into the night.

The light came from a pair of big oil lanterns over the doorway, the illumination tangling through the branches of the trees and casting a great spotted pattern on the face of the house across the street. That house was vacant, the shutters closed. It looked to Jimmy like the face of death.

And death, he knew, was in the air.

He gave that thought and that picture one glance, turning back to the barn itself, and the group outside it—the men, the excited, pleased faces of men waiting to see a fight, and the horses at the hitching racks tossing their heads so that their eyes flashed like metal in the light.

A comfortable and homely sight, that.

And upstairs, the methodical orchestra was beginning the next dance, a schottische!

He remembered what the tramp had promised Paula Carson—that he would dance a schottische with her, that night!

There was Alabama Joe himself, building a cigarette with deft hands, looking bigger, sleeker, than ever, and always with a good-natured smile, and a cheerful word for the people next to him.

"You'd better get out of here," some one told him. "That Parker is bad business to tangle with!"

"I'll get out as soon as I've finished

this smoke," said he. "Always hate to smoke when I'm walking; it gets too much into your lungs, that way." He smiled as he said it.

They began to fall back from him and make a little circle.

And into that circle marched Parker with great strides.

He was really splendid. He looked like something in a play, or in a book. He marched up to the tramp and confronted him, letting a pause of a second or so endure while he overbore the other with his mere presence. He stood close. Big as the Stingaree was, this other towered over him a pair of vital inches. He outbulked the tramp, too, with his high head, and his fine, square shoulders.

But Stingaree did not wince back, nor did his expression change; but his calm eye and his smile still traveled up and down the form of Tyndal's heir.

"You wanted to see me?" asked Parker loudly.

Still those footfalls hurried down the stairs. They reminded Jimmy, somehow, of the dripping of water, the quick, anxious dripping of water when a dam is about to break.

"I wanted to see you," said the tramp genially.

"Because I ordered you off the floor, I suppose? I'll tell you this. We don't explain our reasons when we give orders to our dogs, in this part of the world; and some people are no better than dogs!"

Very strong speech, Mr. Stanley Parker. Very strong, indeed!

Words were forming and struggling in the throat of Jimmy, he wanted to shout out. He found himself murmuring distinctly: "You fool! You fool! You're half an inch from dying."

He spoke loud enough to disturb an iron-faced forester who nudged him fiercely and said: "Shut up, kid, and let the show go on!"

Jimmy hardly felt the shove or heard the words, so intently was he dwelling upon the faces and the words of the main combatants.

"Am I a dog, Parker?" asked the tramp mildly.

"You're little better," said Stanley Parker, in what sounded like a prepared speech. "A parasite on society. A wretched, useless drag on your fellow man! If I had my way, I'd whip you and your kind out of Fort Anxious and every other decent town in this country!"

"You'd whip me out?" asked the other, shaking his head and still smiling —in depreciation of the mildest sort.

"Yellow!" snorted the forester softly, in his deep disgust. "There ain't gunna be no fight at all!"

"Well," said Alabama Joe, "you talk like a judge, Parker. But I'd like to know your right."

"You'd like to know what?" roared Parker, coming within a foot of the tramp's face, his fists clenched.

But Alabama neither made preparations for defense nor shrank back. He merely said: "You gotta great big reputation up here, Parker."

"What has that got to do with you?" demanded Parker, not making very good sense on this occasion.

"That's what I want to know," said Alabama Joe. "It's a strange thing what makes a reputation in some parts of the world. Down in my neck of the woods it's one thing. But up here it's another. Up here all that a fellow needs to do, it seems, is to borrow a man's gun—and then murder him with it!"

Every word was clearly spoken, but an instant afterward, all that Jimmy could remember was that one word: "Murder!"

It rang out, somehow, in spite of the fact that it was not loudly spoken. It rang in his ears. It dwelt like an echo under the trees.

"Murder!"

It was big Parker who gave back, now.

He went back a whole stride, like a man who has been staggered by a heavy blow, and his face was the ugliest thing that Jimmy had ever seen, it was so white, so drawn. The mouth gaped, the eyes stared.

"Murder?" said Parker in a gasp which undoubtedly he had meant to be a roar. "You cur, are you referring to Bob Dillman?"

The answer of the tramp was a marvel of its kind.

He flicked the ash from his cigarette, actually looking down to do so, and then he drew in a breath of smoke—and breathed it out straight into the face of Mr. Stanley Parker.

"Boy," said he, "Bob Dillman would have eaten three slow-footed curs like you and never have known that he'd dined. You never had the heart to stand to him. You're only brave enough, Parker, for murder!"

Once again that word hung in the air, like smoke from a gun.

This time it took Parker not altogether unprepared. His voice was something between a groan and a roar, and he smashed his fist straight at the tramp's head.

Now, Jimmy had fought many a battle in water and dry land, and he knew that the punch which lands is the one that starts no farther back than the hip.

He himself could have avoided this blow, this swinging, ponderous effort, without trouble. But the tramp did not dodge back. Instead, he swayed his head to the side, and as the heavy fist shot past his ear, he stepped in—stepped up and in like a dancer rising on his toes; and as his weight descended to his heels, his hand—his left hand it was—jerked over the big shoulder of Stanley Parker and dropped on the side of his jaw with an impact as audible as the clapping of two open hands.

Stanley Parker crumpled to his face.

CHAPTER XXI.

HE MEANS MURDER.

WOULD they know him now?

As he stepped back, it seemed to Jimmy that the murmur from the crowd must be saying softly: "The Stingaree!"

But they were saying nothing at all. They were simply gasping—and most of all, those stalwart lumberjacks who had seen the massive fists of Parker at work before this night. They had seen him crush the heroes of bunk houses and log drives. They knew him as an unbeaten man, and lo! at a stroke, the bubble was pricked, and he lay ruined in the deep velvet dust of the street.

If that was not enough to tell them, should they not have guessed, when they saw the tramp stand in his place, looking down to Tyndal's heir, and raise the undiscarded cigarette to his lips for another thoughtful puff?

He had not dropped it in the encounter. He had known that one blow would be enough. And he was right.

No common man could have dealt such a stroke. Certainly not one man in a million could have been so sure of the result! But still they did not guess. They did not know, on the whole, about the Stingaree, perhaps.

And yet it was wonderful that the tramp should have mentioned Bob Dillman before he fought. It was giving away his secret hand. It was placing his cards upon the table. It was letting the world see him, if the world cared to stop and think what was before its eyes.

The world, on the whole, apparently did not care to pause; but there was at least one Charlie Dyce who would understand in one instant, when he heard this reported.

So Jimmy drew his breath, and saw the future in the present moment.

No one moved, at first, until the tramp stepped back a little, and said:

"If there are any friends of this fellow around here, they might as well pick him up before he strangles in the dust."

Several went in, at that, and raised the fallen man.

He was quite unconscious. The blow had landed on his jaw, but the shock of it, or of his fall to the ground, had started his nose bleeding. Some one brought a can of water and threw it into his face.

Then every one scattered back.

They did not care to be seen by the heir of Mr. Tyndal as witnesses to the fall of big Stanley Parker. They fell back, and Parker got staggering to his feet.

He was still quite at sea. His breath came audibly, in faint groans. He kept reaching a hand to his head and muttering something about a desire for his hat.

Then he came to himself with a start, when he nearly had run into the tramp. He recoiled and almost fell in his effort to get away from Alabama Joe.

"You?" said he, in drunken bewilderment.

The voice of Alabama sobered him at once.

Said the tramp: "Go home and get your gun, son. Bring it here and you'll find me easy to get at. Or I suppose you'd prefer to send a couple of murderers to finish me off?"

At this, with the red still trickling on his dusty face, Parker got himself together, stared a moment at the other, and then turned and went hastily off down the street.

Every one looked after him, bewildered, and Jimmy saw him tapping the pickets of a fence with his extended hand, like a boy going home from school. It made Jimmy sigh to think that even Stanley Parker had one day been as other boys, without a great disgrace hanging upon him. Now, he had been beaten once, and must fight for his life to redeem the disgrace.

Even with a gun, indeed, he could never recapture the lost ground. To do that, he should have leaped at the throat of the tramp like a tiger, the instant he recovered his senses.

Such was human glory, thought Jimmy, though in other words. That very evening, there had been in Fort Anxious no man so envied as young Mr. Parker. That moment, there was no man who would have stepped into his shoes!

And then the crowd swerved in around the spot. They talked. They murmured together in knots, with many gesticulations, and Jimmy's poisoned ear could hear only one word over and over:

"Murder?"

Had Bob Dillman been murdered—and not killed in fair fight? The accusation had been made, and all the conduct of Parker before the fight and during it seemed to support that accusation.

A hand touched the shoulder of Jimmy Green, and he turned to look up to the face of the tramp, not smiling, now.

"Jimmy," said he, "did you see it?"

"I saw!" said Jimmy hoarsely.

He followed the big man into the deepest shadows among the trees.

"He's going to murder me, now, if he can buy guns enough to do it," said the tramp.

"Get out of Fort Anxious, Joe!" said the boy, panting with his eagerness.

"I'm trapped," said the other, surprisingly. "Charlie Dyce is closing on my trail. If I leave, I get into deep woods, or rivers, or what not. I know the map, but not the land. I'm not a woodsman, and they'd run me down in no time. Jimmy, I've got to leave, but it will be hard sledding, unless I have a guide."

"I'll get you one!" said the boy.

"Who?"

"An Indian."

"That Awaskees that I've heard you talk about?"

"Yes. I'll get him!"

"Then get him for me now. Offer him any money that you want for a reward——"

"He'll go because I tell him to go!" said the boy proudly. "But you come with me, Joe!"

"Ah, and I'd like to!" said the other. "But I don't dare, Jim. I've got to stay here."

"Why, why?" stammered the boy.

"Well, because I've given my word."

"To whom?"

"To Paula Carson—that I'd dance a schottische, and I'm a crook who always keeps his promise, Jim!"

He laughed a little as he spoke.

Jimmy went nearer to him and gripped the big, soft, smooth arm. No one could have guessed at its strength.

"He does mean murder, Joe!" said he.

"I saw it in his face," replied the other, "but I've got to take my chance. Who is he likely to buy for the job? Can you tell me that?"

"I don't know!" said Jimmy. "There's half-breeds that would do it cheap."

"He won't trouble about the price, Jim."

"Get out of Fort Anxious!" begged the boy. "Get out! I'll have Awaskees for you! Joe, get out of the Fort."

"She'll expect me, Jimmy! She's wondering right now not so much how the fight is coming out as whether or not I'll come back to dance with her!"

"She knew how the fight would come out before ever it started," said Jimmy.

"D'you think so, son?"

"I heard her beg him not to go."

"In spite of those big, broad shoulders? Ah, Jim, there's a woman! Her like isn't born twice in the same century! But tell me one thing before you go for the Indian. Can you guess who he might hire? Can you give me a hint? I walk in the dark. Another week and I would know this town, but I couldn't wait another week. Not with Dyce out of the town and on my back trail. I've left too many sign, in my life, Jimmy. Even a child could follow my spoor now! Tell me who to guess at?"

The mind of Jimmy whirled.

Before it passed in swift review the faces which he knew in Fort Anxious, the faces which he had known in the dance hall, smiling, gay, or grave.

Then he cried out softly, almost as though the names had been whispered to him by another pair of lips:

"Henri and Simon Lafitte!"

"Ah? Who are they, Jim?"

"They're small and sleek looking. Something like you, only smaller."

"Thanks!" chuckled the tramp, without malice.

"They've got black hair and eyes, though. Sort of ratty eyes, Joe. You'd know them if you saw them! Go upstairs and get somebody to point them out!"

"I'll know them well enough by this," said the tramp through his teeth. "And heaven keep any small, sleek-looking, black-haired man from making a hip movement to-night, so long as I can see him! Go on, Jim, and get Awaskees for me!"

Jimmy turned away, but he did not go at once.

Instead, he waited for a moment to see the crowd dissolving before the door of the barn.

In a way, this flurry which had meant the death of Stanley Parker's reputation had been no greater or more permanent than a whirl of dust and dead leaves, which eventually are scattered and leave no trace behind them.

So the crowd was now pouring back into the barn door, chattering, and some one was laughing loudly—it could not

be at the fight, but at some story he had heard. Already, they had room in their minds for jokes!

They streamed back into the barn. They were more interested in their next dances than in the event which they had just seen, except that they would wish to retail the story to the ones who had missed it. These late comers were banked and stacked as in a backwash, eagerly picking up those who had been eye and ear witnesses; and the latter pushed them rudely aside, as though saying that the whole affair had been nothing.

Nothing to them; but to Stanley Parker, more than life and death itself.

For Jimmy could picture him sitting in his room with his head in his hands, wondering how he dared to face the world the next day, wondering who would next accuse him of having borrowed from Bob Dillman the gun with which he killed him.

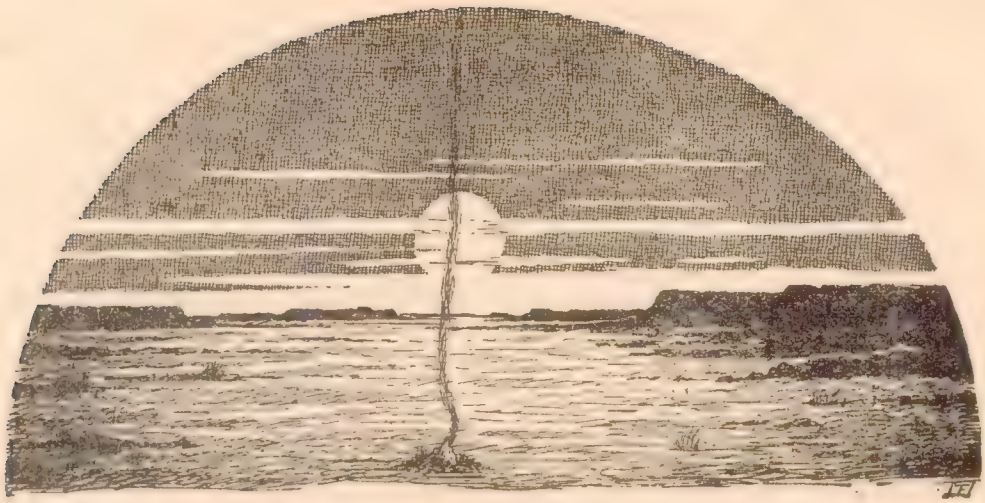
Or, instead of pondering, was he as the tramp suggested now hiring murderers to wipe out the man who had shamed him?

Jimmy took a quick, deep breath. He glanced behind him once more, saw the lamplight of the doorway glinting on the smooth head of the Stingaree, and then bolted down the street to find Awaskees, the Cree.

To be continued in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

CAUGHT AT LAST!

HERE is a wolf so crafty, so wily, so ruthless, that he has, for years, eluded skilled hunters and their dogs, escaped from traps, and finally has fallen a prey to the official pursuers of all outlaws—a sheriff and his posse! Two Toes is this criminal's name, and, for his evil deeds, the old king of the timber wolves has been tried and sentenced to spend the rest of his days behind the bars. Into the zoo at Memphis the wolf bandit must go, and the fleet feet which carried him so well over hill and dale at the head of his pack, enabling him to outwit the hunters and trappers who vowed to "get" him, must now bear him to a den of steel. There the wild wolf must dwell, thinking of the great days when no trap was strong enough to hold him, and all but two of the toes of his right hind paw were not too high a price to pay for liberty! Not sheep and goats alone fell victims to the mighty Two Toes; it was not unusual for cows and even bulls to be pulled down by the four-footed bandit. Already, Two Toes is famous in song and story in his own country, and that the fame of such a "bad man" will not decrease in the telling one may feel assured.



Drawn Fire

By Roy W. Hinds

Author of "Not So Wild," etc.

THE echo of the shot and Sheriff Al Criswell's leap were simultaneous. The roar of the gun itself filled the little canyon for the fragment of a second, and its echo was still in the air when Criswell, his nerves and his body attuned to the perils of his position, made his plunge for cover.

Luckily, cover was near at hand—just a few feet—and the sheriff was behind the boulder when the second shot disturbed the canyon.

Yet he had not come off unscathed. There was a burning sensation in his left shoulder, and a warm trickle down the flesh. It could not be a very serious wound, however, for he still had full use of the arm. Behind the boulder he tried it. He could move it up and down, without augmenting the burning sensation. There were no bones shattered, and the flesh must have been touched only slightly.

That was a matter for self-congratulation, yet Sheriff Criswell hardly thought of that in the face of another fact, devastating, connected with that first shot. It had dropped his horse. The animal had staggered and fallen to its knees as the officer sprang away. He had been standing at the horse's head, adjusting a bridle strap.

He peeped out now from behind the boulder, with a gun in his right hand. The horse had gone even farther than its knees by that time. It lay flat on the rocky earth, kicking and struggling. The bullet had sunk into the neck, and the gray rocks were turning crimson where the horse lay. It took only a glance to see that that animal would never rise again.

Sheriff Criswell fired, mercifully, and his horse became still.

There was no time to deplore his loss. He sized up his surroundings. The shot must have come from the clump of jack oaks across the creek. The man who lurked in that ambush could not get around behind the sheriff without first exposing himself for several seconds, no matter how fast he ran

from one cover to another. He could retreat without being seen as Criswell could not get a look at the ground behind the jack oaks. But he must be careful how he moved.

He had been shot at from behind, without even a tiny, warning sound. It was very early in the morning, with the sun just shouldering an eastern cliff. It was cool now, but it would be a day of heat. The sheriff kept his eyes glued to the jack oaks. He must not allow his adversary those few seconds of precious time necessary to get from his ambush into another, from which he could proceed to a position behind without being seen. If he did that, he had merely to take aim at his leisure and fire. The boulder would no longer be a shelter.

An unseen enemy. A thought calculated to upset even such a grim and steady young man as Sheriff Al Criswell. If he could just get a peep at him!

It must be Nick Spann. Nick was the only bitter enemy the sheriff had in the Beaver Hills and in the Osage prairie lands to the east. The officer had many political enemies and numerous foes among the shady elements, but he could think of no man who would creep up behind and shoot without warning.

Furthermore, the Beaver Hills were Nick Spann's tramping grounds. Nick had been driven into them many times by Sheriff Criswell. There had been two Spanns—Nick and his brother Steve. Sheriff Criswell had captured Steve, and there was nothing more to worry about from him. Steve was doing life. Of the two, Nick was the most desperate. He was the killer of that bandit pair. He had sworn to get Sheriff Criswell.

That had been the summer before. Nick disappeared, after escaping the trap into which Steve fell; but he had mailed a note to the officer from a town a hundred miles south, a note of defiance and threat.

Yes, it was almost a certainty that Nick Spann had returned to the Beaver Hills, with their winding canyons, thick woods, caves. The shot that flicked Sheriff Criswell's shoulder and dropped his horse accounted for a series of depredations west of the Beaver country, the latest of which had sent the sheriff on this trip. He was on his way back to Prairie City now. It was a good forty miles, fifteen in the hills.

"Well," mused the officer, "I'll have to get a look into them jack oaks some way."

This required considerable planning and careful execution. Not having caught a glimpse of his enemy, he knew not exactly where to look for him. He could dart from the boulder to another, and then to various shelters until he came to the creek. Between each he would be exposed, not more than two or three seconds at a time, if he moved with all possible speed. But to cross the creek—that was another matter. That would expose him for at least thirty seconds, and a man in ambush can do a lot in thirty seconds with a shining target.

Never taking his eyes off the jack oaks, the sheriff examined his wound. It was trivial, barring the possibility of infection. He tucked a handkerchief under his shirt. Bleeding had stopped.

Then he began his maneuvers. They were successful, at least as far as the creek. He stopped there. No shot had been taken at him from cover to cover —but the problem of that thirty seconds' exposure had yet to be solved.

As he lay on the ground in the brush at the edge of the creek, the sheriff got his first glimpse of the man who sought his life—just a flash of him as he moved in the jack oaks.

It was Nick Spann.

Although the sheriff's gun was in hand, ready, he had not fired. The tar-

get had been altogether too fleeting. It would be folly to advertise his present whereabouts unless he had some hope of bringing the outlaw down. He could not say whether Nick Spann had detected his various movements and was now aware of his position.

Hope rose in the sheriff. The location of Nick Spann was a certainty, though Nick was out of sight at the moment. He was in the jack oaks. Criswell, more alert than ever, watched the point of Nick's disappearance. If he would just stick his head out!

Al Criswell had an impulse to yell at Nick. He would like an open fight. There would be a lot of satisfaction in getting his man in fair combat. In that he felt secure. But that was only a fleeting thought. Nick Spann was not a fellow who could be relied on, even if he gave a promise. No chances could be taken with Nick. He must watch for another glimpse——

The sheriff fired.

The bandit had showed himself for another moment, crouched, making for the edge of the jack oaks evidently, with a purpose to cross the creek farther down. He was trying to get behind the officer.

Nick disappeared at the moment of the shot. Criswell could not say whether he had hit him or not. All was quiet.

If Nick had not been hit, the sheriff's predicament was more precarious than ever. His shot must have apprised the outlaw of where to look for his foe. The brush was fairly thick at that point, but there were no trees such as Nick had for shelter.

Al's hope lay in Nick's showing himself again, if he had not been killed. It was nerve-racking, lying there in the brush, not knowing whether his man was dead or alive, or wounded. He had to proceed on the theory that Nick was still living, not having receive any hint that he had been hit.

If he had not been hit, it was suicide for the sheriff to attempt a crossing of the creek.

But, as the minutes dragged by, Al Criswell realized that he must make a movement of some sort. He could not lie there indefinitely. One or the other had to do something to draw fire, if for no other reason than to learn the exact position of his enemy. Nick, apparently, assuming that he was able to, was not going to take the lead. The tension was getting unbearable.

The sheriff crawled through the brush, and clung to the earth behind a little dip in the ground. He put his hat on a stick, and raised it cautiously, slowly, until the crown of it showed above the brush, as a man might raise his head. All the while, with the gun ready, he peered into the jack oaks.

Nothing happened. Nick Spann either did not see the hat or he was wise to the ruse.

As more minutes went by, the sheriff began to take additional hope. Perhaps Nick could not shoot. Perhaps he was dead. Almost an hour had gone by in the brush when Criswell decided to cross the creek.

There was cover on the other bank.

"I can make it in about twenty seconds," Criswell calculated. "Water isn't very deep. Yes, about twenty seconds."

That was the minimum. Twenty seconds is a long time for a man to expose himself to gunfire. A man in ambush can kill another in less than one second.

Sheriff Criswell learned just how long a time twenty seconds is. It was an eternity. Or so he felt as he rushed through the low waters of the creek, eyes and gun toward the jack oaks. His nerves were at high pitch when he gained the cover on the other side.

He breathed heavily from his exertions and the excitement. There was, however, a lift of his spirits. Nick

Spann had not fired at him in the twenty seconds or so, and had Nick been able to fire, he certainly would not have passed up that chance!

The next thing was to invade the jack oaks. That meant additional exposure. But the sheriff set about his maneuvers for that task, not forgetting that Nick, for some reason or another, might not have had a good shot at him heretofore, and was holding off until he got closer. Nick might be wounded, on the ground, and able to fire as the officer approached.

Al Criswell got into the jack oaks. There were numerous little cedars among them, and evergreen bushes concealed much of the earth. All was still.

Tree by tree, and bush by bush, the sheriff advanced. Nick Spann had vanished.

About four o'clock that afternoon Sheriff Al Criswell emerged from the Beaver Hills onto the prairie, still meditating upon the mystery that developed from the shooting in the canyon. He had spent an hour or more after searching the jack oaks in and about the canyon, still on the hunt for Nick Spann. His first idea had been that Nick was wounded from the shot he had fired at him from the brush beside the creek, yet no trace of blood was found at the point where Nick had been when that shot was let loose.

It was an ordeal, the subsequent hunt, for the sheriff suspected a ruse on Nick's part.

"He went out of the jack oaks at the other end while I was coming into 'em," he ruminated. "But why didn't he lay for me somewhere else? He had a thousand chances at me while I was hunting around there and getting stuff out of my saddlebags. It's got me beat!"

The only explanation he could make was that Nick was short of cartridges. The outlaw must have fired his last shot as the sheriff darted behind the boulder. It would seem that only the lack of a cartridge could have saved Criswell in the canyon and all along the way out of the Beaver Hills.

Well, it was a relief to get out of those hills. Every moment of the day had been one of high tension. Criswell had a feeling that Nick Spann had withdrawn, to waylay him on the journey out of the hills. This feeling slowed the sheriff down. He had constantly to be on the lookout. Ordinarily, he could have walked from the canyon to the edge of the prairie by one or two o'clock.

The hills and the sun were behind him, but twenty-five miles of open country lay between him and Prairie City.

As he went on and on and the hills receded, the world took on a look of emptiness. A drought had fallen upon the prairie. The grass was dry and stunted, hardly up to a man's ankles. There was nothing in sight but flat earth and sky. The soil was arid. There was a road several miles to the north, and another a few miles to the south; but the prairie was as good going as the highways, for man or beast. From the point at which Criswell came out of the hills he would only have added miles to his journey by seeking a road, and with but a slim chance, so late in the day, of getting a lift.

He was strong and in a mood for traveling. Last night's sleep had been long and refreshing. He had had plenty of water to drink on the walk out of the hills, and now had a canteen full, with no feeling of thirst. He had eaten heartily just before leaving the hills, and he had plenty of tobacco.

"I'll get me another horse," he mused, "and in a day or so I'll go back to the canyon."

He had stripped the saddle and gear off the dead horse and hidden them.

He was thinking of that property, as well as another excursion in quest of Nick Spann.

"It's certainly a mystery what become o' that fella."

Pausing to light his pipe, he faced west again, taking a slant at the sun. The dark line of the hills, very low now, was the only thing that relieved the feeling of being in the midst of a vast space, alone.

Turning east again, even the illusion created by the hills was gone. He was in a vast solitude, flat land and sky. He had never felt just this way about the prairie before, never having walked across it. Galloping on a swift horse is not so conducive to meditation as is walking.

"Feels funny, out here, all alone. Not even a horse to talk to. Not a living thing but me."

He began to calculate the moon. He remembered that it had risen rather late the night before. It would rise later to-night. He depended upon the moon as a guide when the sun should have vanished.

"But I'll have to go by the north star till the moon comes up."

It was remarkable that in that short space of time he had come to uttering his thoughts aloud. A man gets that way alone, even in hills, and with a horse under him. He was in no danger of becoming lost. He would hardly turn completely around, even in darkness; and if he did happen to bear off his course to the north or the south, sooner or later he would hit a road that would take him into Prairie City.

"I guess maybe I'll have to take a nap some time to-night. I did fifteen miles, uphill and down, before I hit the prairie. Feel spry enough now, but I'll need sleep before I hit town."

Well, that would be simple. The night, no doubt, would be warm. There was no sign of a storm. Warm night and a clear sky.

"Lucky Nick Spann's bullets didn't get me," muttered the sheriff.

Anyhow, Nick Spann couldn't ambush him out here. A fellow can't hide behind a blade of grass.

The sheriff's shoulder was giving him no serious trouble. It was a little sore, but out of his saddlebags he had got a disinfectant and a clean bandage. A slight flesh wound.

He turned to take another slant at the sun, for there was not a mark ahead by which to guide himself, nor would there be until the stars came out. With his watch, he allowed for time, and from the sun set his course due east.

Yes, he was headed on a true course for Prairie City. Even the thin, dark line of the hills had gone down into the prarie. The sun had lost some of its brilliance. It did not blind him so when he took a look at it. He studied its position and the dial of his watch, then turned to face east.

But he did not face east just then. A movement on the tawny expanse of withering grass caught his eye—a movement north and west.

He gazed sharply. It had disappeared. There was nothing in sight.

"Guess my eyes are playing me tricks."

He walked on, east, but every now and then he turned to look into the northwest. The movement again.

There was no mistaking it. A dark line no taller than a lead pencil moved on the prairie.

Sheriff Al Criswell sat down, with a certain pleasant idea roaming in his brain. He realized that, standing, he might appear to the other man as a dark line no taller than a lead pencil, if there was a man out there.

The object did not disappear this time. It persisted. It did not move with the speed of a horse and rider. Anyhow, a horse and rider would appear as a blot, much higher, and not as a line.

The thing was coming toward him. There were long minutes in which it did not seem to move at all or to grow larger; yet, as time went by, the sheriff could see that it was getting larger. The lack of movement now was due to the fact that the mark was approaching him almost directly. It was a man, on foot.

If he kept on the course he seemed to be following, he would cut past the sheriff some distance to the west, and would finish in some of the towns that lay south of Prairie City. He was evidently headed that way. There was a pleased grin on the sheriff's face as he watched.

"That's Nick Spann. He cut up north from that jack-oak grove, and out of the hills farther up. Now he's cutting southeast, to make his get-away. Wonder why he ducked that way?"

That was a mystery, but the sheriff had plenty of time to meditate upon various theories. The most plausible was that Nick had come upon the sheriff's camp while on his way to some hidden retreat, and had taken a couple of shots at him—perhaps all the cartridges he had. That was the only possible excuse for Nick having abandoned his ambuscade. The officer had taken any number of precarious chances to get into the jack oaks, and Nick had not fired. He must have fled.

Well, perhaps he had no cartridges now. Perhaps Nick Spann was cutting down across the prairies, to get into some city south of Prairie City, during the night, and with empty guns.

Sheriff Criswell took careful observations of the sun. It would be above the horizon for some little time yet. After it disappeared, there would be a period of almost daylight, then dusk, and twilight, and darkness.

While the oncoming traveler was plainly visible to the sheriff, the sheriff was not to him. Not that Criswell could recognize him, or see anything, in fact, but a steadily enlarging form. It was now about knee high. The traveler could not see the sheriff at all, because the latter sat on the earth. The sheriff lay flat, with his head raised just enough for observation.

He wondered if the oncoming man would get close enough to detect him before darkness. Yes, he would, for he was losing no time. If the man was Nick Spann, he would take alarm at the huddled figure on the prairie—and he would be able to see it before he came within gun range.

Well, that was a problem. The sheriff's previous reflections upon a mortal combat on this prairie were borne in upon him again. A man certainly can't hide behind a blade of grass!

The theory of Nick's actions that morning developed another angle as Al Criswell lay there thinking. Why had he gone to the north, if his objective had been in the southeast? He might have started for one place, of course, and changed his mind. But perhaps he had gone to the north in order to stock up with fresh cartridges. Maybe this was Nick Spann, on the way now from one of his retreats, and with bullets in his guns.

In that case, it would be an open duel. Nick was bound to see the huddled form on the prairie before he came within gunshot. He would circle, if he wished to avoid a battle. He would keep out of range. The sheriff could pursue him, but the moment Nick came within range, Al Criswell would be within range of Nick.

Assuming that Nick's guns were loaded, it would be man to man—there on the prairie, in the twilight.

The sun was half its circle below the horizon when the traveler veered off his course. Though he was still too far away to be recognized, his actions indicated alarm such as Nick Spann might have felt. He had been walking

southeast. Now he turned due west. There was a long distance between the two men.

The sheriff stood upright. He had been seen. He started in pursuit. The man to the west did not exactly flee. He circled, watching. Thus began the maneuvers of the man-killer and the officer, at about the moment the sun departed for the other side of the earth.

Twilight found them circling, and gradually edging toward one another. The sheriff tried a shot, with no hope of hitting his adversary, but thinking to draw fire from him. They were too far apart and the light was too vague now for certain recognition, yet there were in the other man's movements certain familiar signs that told the sheriff he faced Nick Spann. There was probably no doubt in Nick's mind as to the other's identity.

The sheriff was eager to know whether Nick had cartridges. He did not want to kill an unarmed man—even Nick Spann, who had tried to kill him from ambush. Neither did he wish to get recklessly close to Nick if he did have cartridges.

Criswell fired again—and this time he got a reply. The outlaw's gun sounded on the prairie.

That was settled. It was man to man, but the range was impossible as yet. They were maneuvering. Darkness would soon close in.

It came before they got close enough for effective shooting. Both, when they lost sight of each other, moved faster.

The sheriff attempted a quick, encircling movement. It was vital that he see Nick before Nick saw him, or, at least, to see him at the same moment. Each had a gun in hand. It was merely a question of turning it in the right direction and firing accurately. The darkness deepened, and with it came all its advantages and perils—equally balanced.

In the starlight, having circled widely and criss-crossed considerably, without seeing a sign of Nick Spann or hearing a sound, Sheriff Criswell became certain that his quarry had fled. The longer he hunted, the more convinced he became. Nick, under cover of the darkness, had turned tail and run.

In that case, pursuit was impossible. A man might as well try to chase a fish in the ocean as to pursue another man across the immensity of that dark prairie, without the slightest clew as to the direction he had taken.

Downcast, the sheriff studied the heavens for the north star.

He dropped to the earth just in time. Nick Spann's bullet went over his head. Criswell scuttled away. Nick did not fire again. The sheriff had heard a sound somewhere off to the right an instant before the shot. Undoubtedly, Nick had seen his head limned against the sky.

Criswell, fifty feet away from where he had dropped, clung to the earth and looked in all directions. He had not seen the flash of Nick's shot, but for one thing he was happy. Nick Spann meant to fight it out. In his get-away, he did not intend the sheriff to get back into Prairie City to spread the news that the outlaw was abroad again.

The sheriff could not say how much distance there was between him and the killer. He could not say in which direction he lay. He could only crawl about, looking all ways as fast as he could.

When the moon came up a wide area of the prairie would be laid bare, in a faint suffusion at first, steadily growing brighter. Which would be the first to gain the advantage of the moon?

It was dangerous to fire unless one was sure of his target. The flash on the prairie was a revelation upon which the other would instantly profit. Sheriff Criswell continued to crawl about, hoping that Nick would stand up. A

standing man would be visible for a considerable distance in the starlight. But Nick was as wise as the sheriff and took no chances.

Every inch the sheriff moved might be the last progress he would achieve upon this earth. Likewise with Nick Spann. It was impossible to have staged a more equal combat. Chance, luck. Yet there was a possibility of a ruse being successful. But what ruse?

For hours this went on. The moon was about to rise. Sheriff Criswell noticed the first spray of light in the sky that heralded the lunar torch under which a man would die. Sheriff Al Criswell or Bandit Nick Spann? Nick Spann undoubtedly was waiting for the moon, too, as alert as Criswell and as keen of eye.

"But I'll beat him to it," mused the sheriff, and thereupon set into operation the ruse that he had just perfected mentally.

He gathered bits of grass. The dry blades he placed on the earth in a little heap. He covered these with a layer of the greenest shoots he could find, but so scant were these that he had to moisten some of the grass with water from his canteen. He thus had the constituents of a smudge—dry grass underneath, moist grass on top. Over this he put his hat. Under the hat, holding it close to the earth with one hand, he lit a match by flicking the head of it with his fingernail. The hand was in the crown of the hat, cupped so that no light shone on the prairie. The match, flaming, he inserted into the dry grass of his smudge.

Then he removed his hat and scuttled away, fifty feet or more. He stopped and looked back. The match must have gone out before the grass caught. He waited breathlessly. If even a few blades of the dry grass would dance into flame, the light would appear as a match just struck. Some wandering ripple of air caught the few remaining sparks on the match in those bits of dry grass. It flamed slightly. The moist grass on top kept it from flaming too much at once. That little light on the prairie looked exactly as a match just struck. If a match was struck, it must have been by a man's hand. So thought Nick Spann.

He fired, thrice. The bullets scattered the smudge. Sheriff Al Criswell, his eyes sweeping the prairie, caught the flashes of Nick Spann's gun. He sent a fusillade of shots in that direction, just as the moon slid above the earth. He scuttled away again.

There was no need of that, as he discovered later. Nick Spann lay dead in the moonlight.

One of Next Week's Features—"SILENT PARTNERS," by GUTHRIE BROWN.

OIL DIGGERS "STRIKE" RADIUM

AFTER boring for six years in search of oil, and reaching a depth of more than four thousand feet, oil diggers found their drill plunging into a "radium well." This remarkable occurrence took place recently at Maple, Ontario, and the consequent discovery is said to be that of the world's largest radium-content well. The waters were analyzed by experts of McGill University and show three parts of radium for every quadrillion parts of water. The figures, it is said, represent the first quantitative assay which has ever been made of radium in water.

Guns Of Jeopardy

By Robert J. Horton

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

RIVALRY between Lafe Owens, K-T, and Jim Bolten, Double B, culminates when Owens runs for reëlection as president of the Cattlemen's Association. Their foremen, Velie and Fresee, respectively, are also at odds. Larry, Lafe's son, chums with a mysterious youth named Jones, who has helped him in an escapade and now rides with the K-T. Jones admires Molly Owens; Larry loves Jane Bolten. The rustler, Bianco, comes North and robs both outfits; then daringly offers to resell the cattle to their owners. Lafe scornfully refuses; Bolten accepts, thinking Owens has done so. Receiving the latter's authorization to borrow the necessary sum from the bank, Bolten believes he has trapped Owens. Rustlers again raid the K-T; repelling them, Lafe's horse is shot and he is injured in the fall. Fresee comes to offer help, but is ordered off by Larry. Lafe decides to attend the Association meeting despite his injury, and begs Sheriff Rowan to let him handle matters. Helpless, Rowan agrees.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A SECRET MEETING.

WHEN he told Lafe Owens that news of the trouble on the K-T range would leak out, Sheriff Rowan had been right. The peculiar thing about it was that the "news" that leaked out was not news at all, but a rumor. Nothing makes news so fast and furious as a rumor, especially when it cannot be denied nor confirmed. But range folk have ever been stanch supporters of the old adage to the effect that, "Where there's smoke, there's fire."

People in town took the rumor and played with it as a cat plays with a mouse. They listened to all the new angles, then tossed them up to others, with elaborations that were figments of their own imaginations. There had been a birthday party at the K-T ranch

house. No one denied that. The sheriff had been there, and so had Henry Brower, and they did not deny it. But they "knew nothing" of any trouble! And they reiterated it.

Therefore, the populace, both permanent and floating, immediately engaged in the fascinating pastime of manufacturing its own versions. There was but one popular conception of the rumored trouble, accepted by all, and absolutely wrong—there had been an open clash between the K-T and Double B outfits at the Owens ranch. The Double B had tried to break up the party. Jim Bolten and Lafe Owens had indulged in a fist fight! Fresee and Velie had been at the point of gun play. The sheriff had succeeded in calming the participants and restoring order. Otherwise, why should he return to town so late? The doctor had gone out to attend the dead and dying. People had seen Jones ride into town on a lathered horse, change mounts, and ride out again with the physician. There was something which lent authenticity to the rumor. But the doctor merely gave out that he had gone to look over old Lafe, who had fallen from his horse. But that was enough. Lafe Owens was not in the habit of falling off horses. None of the old-timers could remember the stockman ever having had such an accident before. And the sheriff's smug way of dismissing the subject whenever it was broached convinced those who mentioned the matter to him that he knew far more than he would tell, and perhaps held a card or two up his sleeve. All of which pleased the sheriff very much and caused him to admire the wisdom of Lafe Owens.

However, as every one thought, it was bound to come out at "The Annual," as the yearly meeting of the Stockmen's Association was called. Bolten could be depended upon to sling mud; and Lafe would be clever enough to see that each clod turned into a boomerang, and in the mix-up everything would come out clear-cut and polished for the gossipers to feed upon.

Such was the situation in Pondera during the few days preceding the big meeting.

Three days after his fall from his horse, Lafe Owens sat up for a little while. The wheel chair was brought from Great Falls and the next day the stockman insisted that he be put in it. His repeated assertion that it "didn't hurt much" was belied by the white face, the clenched palms, and the tightly pressed lips. Then came the doctor with a message from Fowler and Robertson to the effect that a postponement of the meeting could be arranged if he were willing.

Old Lafe knew Bolten would have to agree to this, or lose by his refusal, and he knew, too, that Bolton would make capital of it. It would not do for the president of the association to be unable to attend at such a time and request a postponement; although he knew the stockmen were sincere in their protest that it was to his interest. Old Lafe craftily respected the effectiveness of dramatics. He would be there!

Meanwhile conditions on the range were normal. Lafe again showed keen insight by making no special preparations in anticipation of another raid soon. He felt that Bianco would await the outcome of the meeting. For what had been suspicion in his mind had now become a conviction. He felt that he held the whip hand. He never hinted at what he thought, not even to Sarah.

"I felt all along that this feud would break out again," he told his wife. "Bolten thinks he is strong enough now to fight me with any kind of weapons. He isn't. I've got to show him that an' settle this business for once an' for all. I'm not going to be here forever, Sarah. Some day this ranch will belong to Larry. I don't propose to leave him an unsettled feud as part of his patrimony. An' I don't propose to set him

the example of backing down an' giving in to an enemy. When I'm through, mother, the feud will be dead and buried, without mourners."

Even Sarah had to acknowledge the wisdom of settling the trouble for good. She had just a vague inkling of the trend of his mind when he said: "I can't get it out of my head that this feud business isn't the main issue." He refused to answer questions or say more on the subject, and he swore her to secrecy regarding the statement.

On Monday, two days before the day of the meeting, Henry Brower sent a message asking if there was anything he could do in town by way of arranging for Lafe's comfort when he came, or otherwise. To this Lafe replied:

"Manage to inspect every stranger who comes into your bank yourself."

This tart message caused Brower considerable worry. He began to wonder if the outlaw, Bianco, might not have some design on the bank. Time and again he stood before the new vault and time-lock system that had been installed but the previous year. Pshaw! The bank was in the center of town, and there were men in the various resorts all night to spread the alarm if an attempt were made to blow open the vault. Moreover, he did not keep a large amount of cash on hand. He finally dismissed his fears; but he kept two lights burning at night instead of one. And he watched for strangers, suspecting that Lafe expected the outlaw leader to send spies to town and that some of them might visit the bank on one pretext or another.

Brower, in fact, was far more in the dark than the sheriff. And, having no official position and income at stake, he was more minded to accept Lafe's rulings without objection or comment.

Monday night Lafe announced he would go to town the next afternoon. This was so he might rest the night and morning before the meeting, and thus not arrive wearied by the ride in the spring wagon, which had been converted into something of a camouflaged ambulance. Lafe was to lie on mattresses and quilts until the town came into sight. Then he was to sit on the seat of the buckboard which was to follow with Sarah Owens and Molly.

Larry announced that he and Jones would go in early in the morning to make the necessary arrangements for Lafe's accommodation at the hotel. As a matter of fact, they left Monday night; Jones going directly to Pondera and Larry riding south to Great Falls at a furious clip; there to obtain a fresh horse and endeavor to get up to Pondera by the time of his father's arrival. He left the arrangements in town to Jones, explaining carefully what was required.

But Lafe had momentarily failed to anticipate Bolten's move. The Double B owner also decided to go to town the day before the meeting, after a hurried circuit of much of the east half of the range. The result was that Bolten came riding at a fast pace from behind when Lafe was but fairly started on his way, and the Double B owner saw his rival lying in the spring wagon and stopped to inquire how he felt.

"I'm favoring my back," was Lafe's curt answer.

But it was now impossible to carry out the original plan and ride into town sitting in the seat of the buckboard. The wheel chair was lashed to the rear of the wagon. Lafe's sense of the dramatic prompted him to make another swift decision. He had intended to try to walk to the hall, with support, of course; now he decided to go to the meeting in the wheel chair.

"I'm going to kick all of Bolten's props out from under him," he told Stan Velie, who was driving the wagon. "If it's a case of stealing the other fellow's thunder, all the better."

Lafe had been quick to note that only

one man rode to town with Bolten. He considered it significant in more ways than one that this man should be Fresee. He had glanced at Fresee only once, and then when he had felt the small, glittering eyes upon him. Lafe's glance had not been one to comfort any one. He had ordered his own outfit to stay on the range while he was gone. Velie was to return to the ranch that night as a precaution against a raid in Lafe's absence. Lafe did not believe this precaution would be necessary.

Bolten had refused point-blank to allow Jane to go to town. Her mother had tried unsuccessfully to change his mind. There had been a coolness between the father and daughter since the affair of the party. Bolten assumed that Jane's aloofness and preoccupation were the natural result of his talk with her after her return from the K-T Ranch. But her mother believed that something else was in the wind, and she expected Jane to tell her when the time should come. Jane could have told no one anything, for she did not know her own mind.

After her father had left for town with Fresee, Jane had her horse saddled. It was her custom to ride twice each day, regardless of weather conditions, except when a blizzard was raging. She took a canter in the early morning, and in the late afternoon or evening she was usually in the saddle for more than an hour; frequently for two or three. She loved the exercise.

On many of these rides she had met Fresee; had spoken to him briefly when he had reined in his horse and swept off his hat. But, since the party, she had not seen him close enough to have him attempt to speak to her. She had even avoided looking in his direction when she saw him. But his cunning black eyes had followed her whenever she was anywhere around. Bolten had spoken to him about Jane, and Fresee had merely nodded. He had been careful that his employer had not seen his sneering smile as he turned away.

Now, for the first time, Jane began to think about these frequent meetings, and her face flushed with anger as she wondered if they had not been engineered by Fresee. If this were true, every such encounter was nothing less than an insult. If Larry knew—— If Larry knew——

Jane reined in her horse atop a swell of the prairie and stared into the west where the sun was sinking in a blaze of glory. She remembered vividly the look of intense hatred and malice that Fresee had flashed at Larry when the youth had announced that he would ride home with her. She remembered the diabolical gleam in his eyes when Larry had ordered him off the ranch. She knew Fresee was unscrupulous, ruthless, and cruel where his personal affairs were concerned. The slightest act of insubordination brought down the fury of his wrath upon the offender. She had seen him in the white heat of almost uncontrollable rage when he did not know she was watching him. And on the morrow, he and Larry would be in town. If they should have words, with Fresee ready to take offense at anything——

A feeling of panic assailed the girl. So far as Fresee was concerned, anything could happen; but he would be clever enough to protect himself from the law. Self-defense was an alibi which was easily proved in a country where men drew and fired in the wink of an eye. When Jane was much younger, Fresee had amused her with his displays of pistol practice. The rapidity with which he drew his weapon, and his unfailing accuracy, were uncanny, she thought. And the more she thought, the more worried she became. If she could ride to the K-T Ranch and extract a promise from Larry not to go near Fresee or speak to him—— But Larry had said he would go to town

early. And he was going by way of Great Falls.

Jane's face flushed again, and she thrilled. "Larry boy, I love you," she said aloud, her soft-spoken words slipping smoothly away on the vagrant wind. A frightened look came into her eyes. She had to make a decision—this night! By this time next day she could be Larry Owens' wife, or she could be at home, still Jane Bolten, loving him more than ever; and he could be in town, or on his way back, safe, or——

Again came that dreaded thought. Then the power of reasoning seemed to leave her. Her head went up to the wind, her eyes flashed, and her red lips whitened as she pressed them tightly together.

She struck out at a ringing gallop across the plain for home.

Through the breast-high waters of the Teton ford, Larry Owens swam his horse against the current. As he was climbing the slope toward the opening in the trees, he saw the forms—little more than clear-cut shadows—of five riders slip past, bound westward. These, he decided at once, were some of Bianco's men going to town to be present on the day of the meeting.

He dismounted and stole out the opening to where he could see riders; but none of the figures in the saddles seemed large enough to be Bianco. Larry went back to his horse. He led the animal to the edge of the fringe of trees and waited until the horsemen were well out of sight. He had no wish to be followed over the long stretch of open country ahead.

All that night Larry rode, and at sunup he was in the city in the great bend of the Missouri. He put up his horse and soon made an arrangement for a good, fresh mount for the ride up to Pondera that day. He was at the courthouse at opening time and soon had the document for which he had come.

Back across that flowing sea of gold he rode; northwestward, this time. He did not feel weary from his night ride, nor did he feel the lack of proper sleep. He thrilled with hope as he patted his coat over the breast pocket wherein was the marriage license. But now that this preliminary was dispensed with, he felt his first quavers of doubt as to the soundness of the move. If Jane were willing—of which he was not sure—would there not be others who would misunderstand. Some would be careful not to understand. If it were known, there would be talk. He thought more and more of Jane's position. He loved her; he intended to marry her. But had he not been impetuous in proposing marriage immediately? He half hoped Jane would not come. But he knew if she did not he would be bitterly disappointed. They would have to talk it over again, perhaps. But the day was glorious, with the sun filling the world, and a cool, sweet breeze laving the plain. Larry's heart sang, and he whistled as he rode. His was youth, abundant health, a certain, enviable patrimony some day to come, long years to live—and he was in love. He flung the doubts from his brain with a single shake of his head and tickled his mount with the spurs.

At sunset he was in Pondera. Jones met him at the livery.

"Not here yet," said his friend. "You look like you'd found a fat poke or something. I've made all the arrangements for 'em when they come. Any news?"

For a wild moment, Larry was tempted to draw Jones into the office and tell him everything. He caught himself just in time. "None that I'm ready to give out," he said cheerily. "But I may need you on personal business to-morrow."

"Humph," grunted Jones.

"Takes two humps to make a camel," Larry bantered. "Say it again because

you're on the wagon. C'mon an' get a soda."

While they were taking their refreshment, Larry told Jones about the five riders he had seen across the river ford the night before. Jones listened and nodded his head when Larry had finished.

"I saw 'em," he said to Larry's surprise. "Spotted 'em as they came in. Two from the south, another from the north, an' a pair from the west—like they'd just happened along. I was up an' around most of the night. I'll point 'em out to you when I get the chance. They don't look none like mamma darlings. Took to the stud tables after they'd put up their horses, an' have been sleeping all day. Bolten an' Fresee are in."

Larry looked at him in surprise. "Came in a day ahead, too," he said thoughtfully. "Look here, Jones, who else came with them?"

"Two was the crowd," Jones replied "An' I reckon the pair of 'em are enough."

Larry considered this gloomily. If Jane and her mother had been coming in they would have come with Bolten. So Jane was not coming! Suddenly, Larry laughed. It was Jones' turn to appear astonished.

"Just think of some last year's joke?" he inquired.

"If I did, the joke's on me," Larry returned. "Harry, after dad an' the folks get in, an' I've had some supper, I'm going to bed."

His manner puzzled Jones but evoked no comment.

When Lafe Owens drove into town, Larry and Stan Velie helped him from the wagon and practically carried him upstairs to his rooms. Many stockmen already were in town and Lafe greeted all he saw cheerfully and joked about his injury. None knew what the effort cost him and the indomitable will-power it required. So the word went out that Lafe was not nearly as badly hurt as the rumors had it.

Lafe's first act in town was to send for the banker. He and Brower were in conference for nearly an hour. Then Lafe, Sarah, Molly, and Larry had supper in the upstairs sitting room which had been turned over to the K-T owner.

True to his word, Larry went to the room assigned to Jones and himself as soon as he had eaten his meal. He sat on the edge of the bed and told himself he was a fool. Whatever had possessed him in that hour after the party when he had held the rendezvous with Jane! But now that the element of uncertainty had entered into their relations, Larry found he loved her more than ever—more than he had suspected! Bolten had put in some words against him, of course. That was to be expected. But it was Jane's words that counted.

Larry expected Jones to come in and when an hour had passed with no sign of him, he undressed and went to bed. It seemed to Larry, afterward, that he had hardly closed his eyes when he suddenly woke, sitting up in bed with some one shaking him.

"Keep quiet," said a voice in the darkness which he recognized as that of Jones. "You'll have to dress by the light from the window. They're probably watching these rooms."

"Who's they?" Larry muttered sleepily. "What's up?"

"That's what we're going to find out," said Jones, "if you'll get a move on. It's those five pretty boys from Bianco's camp. They're not playing cards, an' they're not drinking. I can tell that something's in the wind. I've been watching 'em all night. Get a jerk on, Larry, it's two in the morning."

Larry dressed hurriedly by the light of the stars that shone through the window. In a short time the friends were feeling their way down the rear stairs and then left the hotel by the back way. Jones took the lead and hurried Larry

across the street to the resort where he had had his trouble with 'Bloat' Simpson. This place had been a hang-out of the Double-B men.

Jones led the way through an open space between two buildings to the rear of the resort. He pointed to a flight of steps outside the building which led to an upper floor, partially concealed from the street by the high false front with its gaudy sign. He drew Larry into the shadow.

"They have all been up there, one or two at a time, to-night," he told Larry in an undertone. "I've watched 'em like a hawk, but took care not to arouse any suspicion. They're waiting for some one. I've been up there an' there are four small rooms, two on each side of a narrow hall. Darker than midnight. I saw light from under the door of the second room on the right. The other room on that side is unlocked an' made up like a bedroom. The two doors on the left are locked. I'd bet my life that they're going to meet somebody up there, for I've been around enough to know the signals."

"Then let's get in that room that isn't locked," Larry suggested.

"An' let 'em walk in on us? It won't——"

A shaft of yellow light struck across the shadows as the rear door of the resort opened silently. Five men slipped out through a width just sufficient to permit of their passage. Then the light was blotted out.

Larry and Jones crouched in the deep shadow cast by the next building while the men climbed the steps slowly and carefully, avoiding any noise. Four of the men were large; one was of comparatively slight build. They opened the door at the top of the steps and disappeared.

Larry pressed Jones' arm. "C'mon," he whispered.

They crept to the other side of the building, past the rear door. Looking up, Larry pointed to the light in the second window—the one nearest the front. The first window was dark. As they looked, the shade was pulled down at the window from which the light shone.

"All set," Larry whispered.

He turned back to the steps and they went up. The door at the head of the flight was not locked. Larry opened it stealthily with his left hand, for his gun was in his right. The short, narrow hall was dark, but light filtered through the crack under the second door on the right. They entered on tiptoe and closed the door behind them.

Larry felt along the wall until he came to the first door. He turned the knob a fraction of an inch—another and another until he had the door open. The murmur of voices came from the other room where the light was burning. Larry stopped short with his foot on the threshold of the room he was about to enter. They heard a voice which carried more clearly than the others:

"I'll do the picking! I know the stock!" Then there was silence, and again the murmurs were heard, less distinctly than before.

Larry pinched Jones' arm, and Jones nudged him in return. The angry voice they had heard belonged to Fresee!

Instantly the thought came to Larry that if Fresee was in there with four of the men from the bad lands—as he most certainly was—one of the original five was missing. As if in answer to this thought, the outer door suddenly was flung open. A dim light flowed into the hall as Larry stepped into the empty room. Jones was not so quick, and as Larry whirled, a form hurtled through the air, there was a dull sound of impact, and Jones went down in a heap.

Larry went through the door in a single leap, striking with his gun barrel. It found its mark on the head of the big shadowy form looming over Jones. The man went over backward with a crash. The light blazed from the opened

door of the other room as Larry dragged Jones into the empty one and kicked the door shut. He found the knob, braced his weight against the door, and almost cried out as his fingers closed on the key in the lock. He turned it instantly.

The man who had been felled was down and out. Boots shuffled in the hall, and there were muttered exclamations. "Keep still!" said a gruff voice.

Larry kept his weight against the door and in another moment there came a shattering impact as one of the men in the hall hurled himself against it. Larry felt the door weave. But it held. He stepped back and his gun spit fire twice as two shots rocked the silence.

The bullets ripped through the flimsy panels of the door, ranging upward, as he had intended. He leaped aside, but the answering volley he expected did not come. Instead, there was a queer rattling of the doorknob. Jones was coming to, and Larry drew him to the window. The window was nailed down. Keeping his gun ready, Larry felt about for something with which to break the panes. His hand came in contact with a chair in the dark at the side of the window. He slipped his gun in its holster and smashed the window with the chair.

Jones was getting up. "They're in the hall," Larry told him in a whisper. "I've got the door locked. You better?"

"I'm all right," Jones grunted. He looked out the window. Below was a scattered heap of old lumber. "No chance to jump," he said. "What's that?"

He was looking at the door, and when Larry turned he saw red tongues licking at the bottom and the hinge side of the door. The hall was silent but for a faint crackling. The outlaws had used the lamp's oil to fire the place.

Larry made the door in three steps and turned the key. "Get away from the window light," he called softly to Jones. He turned the knob and jerked. But there was only a slight give. The door had been tied, probably to the knob of the door across the hall.

"Listen!" cried Jones. "They want us to get caught so we'll have to explain, an' we can't explain. We know too much now. Get away a minute!"

He swept Larry aside and tried the door himself. From below now came a hue and cry.

"Pull that door as hard as you can!" Jones commanded. "I can see the rope against the fire. Pull the door!"

Larry grasped the knob and pulled with all his strength. Jones' gun roared in the room as he shot between the door and the jamb. There was shouting and men could be heard coming up the steps outside. The fire was burning briskly. Another minute and it would have a start that could not be overcome. Jones shot through the narrow crack again, and twice again. The door came open, suddenly, nearly felling Larry, as the rope was split by bullets.

Jones leaped over the flames, with Larry after him. He threw his weight against the front door across the hall—the second door on that side. The lock gave way like so much tin. Once inside the room, Jones shut the door, and Larry sprang to the window. It was down, but there were no nails to hold it. The moonlight came in on this side and Jones began tying blankets and sheets from the bed. They then pulled the bed to the window and tying an end of the improvised rope to it was the work of moments.

"Smother it!" a roaring voice in the hall commanded. "Get the mattresses! Keep that water coming!"

They were fighting the fire out there.

Jones threw the rope out the window. "Go ahead," he ordered, motioning to Larry.

"You first," said Larry.

"Great guns! This is a time to be polite!" cried Jones as he swung out the window and disappeared. Larry saw him drop halfway down. As Larry

went over the sill, his last glimpse of the shadowy interior of the room showed a form bursting through the doorway. In another moment he dropped.

Men were running through the space between the buildings. None stopped to see who they were in the semishadows. They might have been two men who had taken a room over the resort for the night, for all the others knew.

"Look for Fresee," said Larry. "No—wait!" He caught Jones by the arm. "He won't be with the mob. He's too clever for that. Come on."

He led the way hurriedly behind the buildings, away from the animated scene at the rear of the resort. Looking back, they could see no flames shooting from the windows or door upstairs, which showed that the fire was under control. Despite the excitement at the resort, the rest of the town was undisturbed. It could be left to the resort proprietor to see to that. Such places suffered enough notoriety as it was.

Larry led the way between the two buildings and across the street. They entered the hotel by the back way and crept up to their room. Larry lighted the lamp, and watched Jones light a cigarette. His gaze was cool and calculating; then it fired with an inspiration.

"Harry," he said softly, "Fresee is in on this Bianco business. You heard what he told those fellows to-night: 'I'll do the picking.' Said he knew the stock. That means he's picking out the cattle for Bianco to steal. An' you can bet that rustler is stealing from the Double B as well as trying to run off our stock. Fresee is the one who got Bolten all heated up over this association business. He's the one who brought the feud to life! If we can clean out Bianco, we can clean out Fresee at the same time, an' dad'll attend to Bolten."

"I've had some such idea all along," said Jones dryly.

"An' I believe dad suspects it, too," nodded Larry. "Listen, Harry; I've got to be in town to-day. There's another reason aside from being here with dad, an' I don't feel that I've the right to tell you. But you could be away, for a time anyway—if you're not too tired."

Jones looked up quickly with a wry smile. "You're trying to get out that it wouldn't be a bad idea for me to jog down the south side of the river an' try to get a line on where this quintet of bad medicine hits for when it leaves town, I take it."

"You have it," Larry affirmed. "But—if you go—don't take any chances, Harry. If anything happened to you, I—well, maybe you can guess how I'd feel. But it seems the thing to do." His brow wrinkled in thought.

"Well, don't pat yourself on the back none for thinking up something original," Jones grunted. "I'd already made up my mind to do that little thing. But I've got a better chance to find out something down there than you think. Bianco sent those men in to stay over the meeting. That fifth man, who came up afterward an' pounced on me, must have seen us. They know we've got 'em spotted. One or maybe all of 'em will go back pronto with the word to send in somebody else. That's why I've got to get started. I'll have a chance at 'em going an' coming, maybe. Anyway, I can see where they go in an' come out of the bad lands. That'll be a start. I've got a hunch this thing is coming to a head sooner than quick. Your dad's got a card in the hole. I'm going."

When he was again alone, Larry saw the wisdom of Jones' words. He saw, too, that Fresee was double crossing his employer. He had doubtless been months in planning this coup. Some of his men must be in the plot. The dead puncher, Remy, had been an outsider. And Remy had been shot in the back!

It was a long time before Larry slept.

Meanwhile, Jones sped like the wind eastward on the plain, along the south bank of the river.

CHAPTER XXX.

"THE ANNUAL."

AT daylight, Larry was out. He found the street deserted, and soon learned by cautious inspection that no severe damage had been done to the upper floor of the building where the fire had been started. The fire seemed such a senseless piece of business, in the cool gray of the dawn, that Larry doubted if Fresee had had a hand in it at all. For that matter, he could prove nothing against the Double B foreman. And now Larry also doubted the wisdom of the move in sending Jones to watch for the outlaws in the bad lands. In this cooler moment it looked as if he had evaded this errand himself. He thought less about Jane Bolten too. She had become, for the time being, a secondary consideration, in view of the startling new development. At the barn he learned that some riders had left earlier in the morning. The barnman's memory was hazy regarding their appearance or anything they had said. He did not even know how many had gone. They had given him some money, saddled their own horses, and left. "Members of some outfit out east, I suppose," he conjectured. But Larry believed they were the quintet from the river brakes.

After breakfast, Larry told his father of the happenings of the night before. His father listened, with eyes glistening, to what he thought was a confirmation of his own hunch. But when Larry told of Jones' mission, he looked doubtful.

"That was bad business," he said, shaking his head. "I didn't want——"

"I should have gone myself, or have gone along with Jones at least," Larry put in.

"No," frowned his father; "I don't want Bianco to know I'm trying to locate his hang-out. An' young Jones won't be any match for that outfit. The chances are they've got him by this time—caught him, I mean. But we'll have to let that part of it go until after this meeting to-day. When the time comes, I'll show you how to get this cutthroat of a Bianco, an' Fresee with him. Maybe it'll wise Bolten up." The old stockman's eyes were fiery. "I'm going to put some sense in him or break him forever on this range!"

Old Lafe's instructions were brief and to the point. Stan Velie had gone back to the ranch, and Larry was to be his father's right-hand man. The meeting was called for two o'clock in the same hall where the special meeting had been held.

By noon of this day the hotel lobby and the street just outside swarmed with stockmen. North reported to Lafe upstairs that the west end was represented solidly. Robertson and other influential east-end stockmen were there. Amberg was in from the far eastern rim of the range. Bolten was active, mixing with both factions, and in a new mood which reflected cheerfulness and confidence. He had the manner of a man who was holding a card up his sleeve. Fresee was not in evidence, although it was known he was in town.

But Lafe was not concerned with Fresee or his activities at this time. His whole thought was of the meeting. His every move had been carefully planned. For, to his way of thinking, the feud and all that was to come hung upon the action to be taken by the members of the association on this day. Not for a moment did he lose sight of the fact that small details—little things—counted mightily with the men of a wild, open country such as those with whom he had to deal. Nor did he discredit Bolten's activity on the east range. Lafe Owens had never wanted anything more in his life than he wanted reëlection to his position as president of the organization he had built.

By one o'clock the sidewalk and street

in front of the entrance to the hall where the meeting was to be held were packed. Rumors, insidiously started by Bolten and his closest adherents, circulated freely. Talk persisted to the effect that Lafe, at the last moment, intended to withdraw as a candidate owing to his incapacity; that he had been brought to town on a bed in a spring wagon, and sheer will-power alone made it possible for him to attend the meeting. Bolten was cunning in his praise. Lafe was game. He wouldn't mind if Lafe were elected, even if he was not in shape to attend to the association's business!

Thus had Bolten changed his tactics, with the sly whispering of Fresee in his ears. Fresee appeared here and there. He had nothing to say further than he was working for the Double B and naturally would like to see his employer honored. It seemed no more than right, but it was not his business to meddle in such an important matter. In this way the wheels were oiled for what Bolten firmly believed would turn out a victory.

By ten minutes to two practically all the members were in the hall. Sheriff Rowan, with his staff of regular and special deputies, was on hand to see that none went up the stairs except those who belonged in the hall. The crowd, which included many hands from the ranches, was orderly. There seemed no prospect of trouble, and both Lafe and Bolten had taken steps to assure peace.

At five minutes to two a mighty cheer went up as Lafe Owens appeared. He was in a wheel chair, waving his hand to the crowd, calling cheerfully to acquaintances. Larry and three stockmen were with him, and a hush fell over the throng as the chair was lifted up the stairway, step by step. The old centaur's appearance in the hall was the signal for another outburst. And then Lafe waved to them from the platform; his eyes, roving over the sea of faces, sparkled with their old fire. He rapped vigorously on the table at his right side for order. "The secretary will read the minutes of the last annual meeting," he announced, in a clear voice which contained no note of weakness.

The preliminaries began, and as was usual, were soon concluded. Lafe noted that the seating arrangement this day was different than ever before. The division of the range was represented in the seating of those from the west end on his right, and those from the east end on his left. Bolten was in the front seat on the aisle almost in front of Lafe on the left.

Lafe made his report of the affairs of the association, the conditions on the range, and market activities, in a strong voice, referring frequently to notes. He made no mention of rustling or the presence in the district of the notorious outlaw, Bianco.

"An' now," he concluded, "the most important business before this meeting is the election of officers to serve for the next two years. First in order are the nominations for president."

As he looked down at them from under his bushy brows they seemed to forget that he was seated in a wheel chair. The power of his personality belied his infirmity.

Fowler, most powerful of the west-end stockmen, rose quickly. "I nominate Lafe Owens to carry on the good work he has done for the last twenty years," he said in a ringing voice.

"I second the nomination," called North, as several rose to do likewise.

This brought a round of cheering, and those on Lafe's left stirred uneasily in their chairs. Jim Bolten's face wore a puzzled frown. This was all too simple. It showed overabundant confidence. He could see those about him glancing at him. But it was not his move. He raised a hand to the left side of his chin, which was evidently a signal.

It was George Robertson who now took the floor. Lafe was not surprised.

He admired it as the show of loyalty of a friend for a close associate.

"I nominate Jim Bolten," said Robertson in a voice that carried outside the windows. "He has been a loyal member an' worker of the association for the last twenty years. This range has been naturally divided by two great ranches, the Double B an' the Katy. The eastern half feels that it is entitled to a president at least once in that length of time. Twenty years is a long time for one man to serve in this important position. We believe Lafe Owens is entitled to a rest, especially since he—is not too well at present." He avoided Lafe's eyes as he sat down.

It was the east end's clew to cheer, which the members of the faction did lustily. But the cheering lacked spontaneity. The nomination was speedily seconded by several of Bolten's followers.

Lafe Owens now spoke. "In asking this election," he said slowly, "I point to my record. I don't want my ranch referred to as a dividing point. I don't want any division of our range whatsoever." He looked at Amberg and those with him in the rear of the room as he said this. "A division of the range would spell disaster, don't forget that. We cannot split an' stand as we have before. I resent the implication of the membership being divided, with a candidate for each faction. I think of the organization as a whole an' have its best interests at heart as such. Because I am in this chair, don't get the impression that I'm not well, as the member hints. We've all had men laid up for a spell after falls from horses, an' ranch owners aren't immune." He concluded with a smile that was contagious. He was succeeding in making a joke of his injury.

Bolten heard murmurings behind him, and he rose immediately. He faced about so he could see his audience, and began:

"Every man here knows that while there has been no open declaration to that effect, there has been a division of the range for some time. In a way, the east end is not so well protected as the west. I consider that in working for the association as I have, I'm entitled to more than idle consideration. "What is more"—his voice swelled as he warmed to his subject—"I object to any conditions on the range being kept from the members. Everything is not as smooth as our president would have us think. No mention was made of the trouble on the Katy range a week ago. I happen to know that rustling is being attempted right now, an' it's a time when the leader of the organization should be up an' doing to stamp it out. Maybe Lafe Owens will tell you about it. If he doesn't, I will!"

Bolten sat down heavily, and a wave of excitement swept over the crowded room. Those who knew nothing of what had taken place the night of the party looked at each other in surprise, and then looked askance at Lafe Owens. There was a glimmer of triumph on Bolten's face. Lafe had bought protection as well as he, and it was up to him to explain. The mere fact that there had been trouble, and that there was likely to be more trouble, was enough to gain Bolten's point. It might be enough!

With the eyes of all on him, Lafe Owens smiled faintly. "I'd rather you'd tell 'em in the first place, Jim," he said quietly.

Bolten sat as if stunned. Lafe had cleverly set a trap for him, and he had stepped into it with both feet. As he saw the serene look on Lafe's face, he forgot Fresee's wise admonition to hold his temper. He rose angrily.

"All right, Lafe Owens, I will tell 'em!" he cried, whirling on the startled audience. "If Owens won't tell you the truth, I will!" he shouted. "There's been rustlin' goin' on for some time—

since the blizzard. For the first time in twenty years this range is threatened, an' threatened as it has never been threatened before! Why? Bud Davis, one of the Katy's punchers, was shot down an' killed in the blizzard by the cattle thieves. He identified the leader before he died. Owens told me so himself. Was this news given out? Do you know who is headin' this drive on our stock? You've heard rumors about the raid on the Katy a week ago when men were killed an' wounded. Do you know who did it? I know who did it, an' Lafe Owens knows who did it. I'll tell you who did it—it was Bianco!"

Members rose to their feet almost as a man as the name thundered in their ears. They stared at each other and at Lafe Owens open mouthed. It could not be possible! Only those few who already knew, kept cool.

Bolten was holding up a hand for silence. "I told you this was a time for action. My stock's been raided, an' so has the Katy's. I defy Lafe Owens to deny it!" He turned on Owens with flashing eyes.

There was a dead silence. Then, "I have lost no stock," said Lafe firmly.

"Because you paid to get your stock back!" shouted Bolten. "You did lose a hundred head, same as me, at the time of the blizzard. You can't deny it without lyin'. Now, tell the members how we got 'em back, an' remember that no matter what you say, I'm going to come clean!"

Lafe had listened to Bolten's hot words with an unperturbed expression, and this had the effect of calming the members and lending much weight to his words when he spoke.

"It's true there have been raids on the Katy an' the Double B," he said frankly. "In the first raids, stock was run off the Katy an' the Double B. This stock was returned. I have good reason to believe the raids were the work of Bianco. But his activities were confined to the two ranches mentioned and did not affect other properties. There must have been a reason for this, aside from the fact that our cattle were ranging near the bad lands where they could be run off easier than on the open range." Lafe paused and looked thoughtfully at his opponent. "I don't know why my cattle were returned. It still has me guessing. But maybe Jim Bolten will tell you why his stock was returned."

"Because I bought Bianco off with twenty thousand dollars in cash to prevent more trouble!" Bolten cried, shaking his fist at Lafe. "An' you did the same thing to get your cattle back!"

Lafe rapped sharply with the gavel for silence. "If I bought Bianco off, why did he raid my range the second time?" he demanded sternly.

Bolten was inarticulate with rage for several moments. But now that he had stepped into it, had told most of what he knew, he lost all sense of finesse. He stepped into the aisle with arms waving, and began again:

"The only answer I can give to that, men, is that Owens didn't play the game square with this rustler, Bianco. My foreman led a bunch of my men to help run the raiders off the Katy that second time. It looks to me as if our president had intended to hush this business up because he didn't feel capable of dealing with the trouble. I'm not sayin' anything against Lafe in a personal way, but I think it's time he stepped down as president of the association. If you elect him, you'll be putting your O. K. on rustlin' on this range, an' once it gets a good start, nobody can tell where it'll end."

"If you were president, how would you stop it?" Lafe shot back in a ringing voice.

"I'd—I'd——" Bolten hesitated, glowering. "That's passing the buck!" he flared. "I'm not goin' to tell my plans an' have you grab 'em. I think the fact that you tried to keep this busi-

ness quiet will be enough to show the members the handwriting on the wall!"

Then the members witnessed an important and impressive sight. Old Lafe gripped the arms of his chair, lowered his feet from the rest below, and stood erect. His features were pale and grim, with lines of strength standing out, it seemed, in stern relief.

"I don't believe there's a man in this hall, outside of you, Jim Bolten, who would believe I intended to keep this matter quiet. I told all the details to Fred Fowler and George Robertson the night of the second raid—told them everything except the news that you had paid that money to Bianco. I preferred not to tell the association anything unless I told them all. I had no particular wish to tell them that you had bought Bianco off—to use that fact, perhaps, as a weapon; therefore, I let you tell it." He paused; noted every eye upon him, and every ear listening eagerly.

"Bianco solicited twenty thousand dollars from me, as he did from Bolten. I refused to pay! I can prove it. An' to keep the trouble confined to my ranch alone, until after this meeting when I could better cope with the situation, I, as chairman of the directors of our bank, indorsed the loan of twenty thousand dollars to Bolten to buy Bianco off. An' here's the note, with my initials on it, that Bolten signed at the bank!" He drew a slip of paper from an inside pocket and held it aloft.

A world of red whirled about Bolten's head. "It's a trick!" he shouted hoarsely. "Everybody knows I'm good for a twenty-thousand-dollar loan. The note didn't have to be indorsed. It was a trick to save the bank because the bank's wabbling right now!"

"The seecurity for your loans would be none too good with Bianco tearing your ranch to pieces!" thundered Lafe. "I expected something like this when I heard that you told Brower you'd 'break his tin bank' if he didn't let you have the money without the sanction of the directors, and without stating the reason for soliciting the loan. To show that the bank is sound, I've sent for one hundred thousand dollars in cash, an' it'll be on deposit an' in the vault there to-morrow." He was looking straight at Steve Amberg and those other newer members from the far eastern end of the range. "The Katy is behind the bank, lock, stock, an' barrel, an'—if you want to bring about a division of the range as you've hinted—I can say that the whole west end is behind the bank."

There was a mighty cheer at this which was not confined to the west enders alone.

"You're usin' the bank as a club!" Bolten fairly shouted.

"There aren't many men killed on the range with silver bullets!" Lafe retorted. "I'll use any means at my disposal to keep this range intact, an' to protect the members of this association. We will throw personal feelings aside at a time like this. I hereby pledge myself to stamp out the Bianco crew after my reelection. My plans are made an' in the hands of Sheriff Rowan. We have worked for the best. I hardly believe that this Bianco will wait for the worst!"

"Talk—all talk!" Bolten roared above the cheers.

"If there are no other nominations, we will vote for president," Lafe announced, pounding the table with the gavel.

Bolten held up a hand and spoke in a hoarse voice to the men on his side of the room. "The east end will vote solid!"

"The association will vote by ballot!" Lafe thundered.

The hall was in a turmoil as the paper slips were distributed, and each man wrote the name of his choice on the slip given him. A member from the east end and a member from the west end were called to the platform. One held the box containing the collected slips;

the other drew out one at a time, announced the name written thereon, and passed the slip to the secretary for verification and recording.

Lafe remained standing. He did not even keep track in his mind of the number of votes he was receiving. He saw Bolten's look grow blacker and blacker. Then the ordeal was over.

The secretary rose, cleared his throat, and announced: "For Lafe Owens, seventy-one, and for Jim Bolten, fifty-five votes."

Lafe sat down amid the cheers.

Jim Bolten was on his feet instantly, his face purple, his arms upraised, and his fists clenched.

"There will be an East Teton Cattlemen's Association within a week!" he shouted. He stamped down the aisle. "You fellows from the east, follow me!" he commanded from the rear of the hall.

All but eight on that side of the room rose and crowded out behind their leader. Robertson stood irresolute. "I nominated Jim, an' I reckon I'll have to trail with him," he said slowly in the hush. Then he went out. Amberg and the east enders with him stayed in their seats.

"We will proceed with the nomination an' election of the other officers," Lafe told the secretary.

All the officers then serving were reelected unanimously.

The figure in the chair slumped. Larry stepped forward quickly with a glass of water. For the first time in his strenuous life, Lafe Owens had fainted.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A DEMAND.

THE shouted words of Bolten and the cool, clear voice of Lafe Owens had carried to the crowd in the street. The throng was an excited, milling mass, controlled with difficulty by the sheriff and his men, when the irate Double B owner stamped out of the building, with his followers at his back.

"Lafe Owens is president!"

"The association's busted up!"

"The range is split wide open!"

Cries went up on all sides as Bolten and his followers pushed through the crowd on their way to the hotel. Since the insurgents were in sight and the other members of what had been the cattlemen's organization were not, the mob massed in front of the hotel for a glimpse through the window at the turbulent scene within. Fresee now was at the side of his employer, slyly gaining his ear, his eyes darting everywhere. With a smirk on his lips, he wore an air of triumph.

It was Robertson who finally brought order out of chaos. He admonished the other east enders to refrain from airing their troubles and got Bolton off to one side.

"This won't get us anything," he said, shaking his friend by the shoulders. "You're just making a spectacle of yourself. Cool down! You can't manage this outfit by swearing an' acting mad. We've lost that bunch of Scotchmen out east, an' it was that bank business that did it. You can't count on me, Jim, unless you're ready to show some sense. Pull yourself together an' I'll tell the bunch you'll have something to say to 'em later in the afternoon. Go to your room until you've got hold of yourself."

Bolten bit his lip to stem the tide of vigorous profanity that rose to it. He knew Robertson was speaking sensibly. "All right," he decided. "You get the word around that our bunch will meet in the hall at five o'clock. An' I sure want to see that Amberg upstairs." He ceased as a man touched his arm.

It was the teller from the bank. "Can I see you a moment, Mr. Bolten?" he asked respectfully.

Robertson turned away. "You can say what you've got to say," scowled Bolten.

"Mr. Brower wishes to see you at the bank," said the teller.

Bolten frowned. What was this, now? He had no business at the bank. Perhaps it was about the twenty-thousand-dollar note. "I'm very busy," he grumbled. "I guess Brower can wait a while."

"He said he would like to see you in his office right after the meeting, Mr. Bolten," the clerk persisted.

"Same as giving orders, eh?" Bolten said angrily. "Well, you tell him——" He paused, pursing his lips. "No—I'll be right over," he decided. "You tell him that."

The teller bowed slightly and went out as Bolten beckoned to Robertson.

"Brower wants to see me," he muttered. "News travels fast in this town. I'm going over to the bank an' find out what kind of an underhand game he figures to play. I want to know where I stand in every way."

"Well, don't antagonize the bank," Robertson warned. "We're all in the same boat when it comes to finances. I mean us east enders."

"Don't blame me for anything," Bolten growled. "If Brower's got any scheme in mind, you can lay to it that Lafe put it in his head."

But Robertson had a worried look as he passed the word among the east enders to gather in the hall at five o'clock. He, too, wanted to see Amberg, and he was waiting until the stockman should appear.

"You want to see me?" Bolten demanded, as he thrashed into Henry Browers' private office in the rear of the bank.

"Sit down." said Brower politely, indicating a chair in front of his desk. The banker seemed to radiate a debonair mood this afternoon. He wore a white flower in his coat lapel.

"All decked out as if for a wedding," snorted Bolten. "Guess that cash deposit of Lafe's perked you up a bit."

"We didn't need it," said the banker cheerfully. "It's merely to strengthen confidence in the institution which you saw fit to attack." An aloofness came into his manner. "You do not seem to think very much of this bank, Mr. Bolten."

"Thanks for the handle to the name," said Bolten sarcastically. "As I'm probably your best customer, I reckon I'm entitled to a show of respect. What was the general idea in Lafe's waving my last note in front of the meeting?"

"He did that, I believe, to protect himself," Brower replied coolly. "Incidentally, I'll have to call that note, Mr. Bolten."

"Yeah?" Bolten's eyes widened. "You want the money—now?"

"We have considerable of your paper which is payable on demand," said Brower. "We are calling that paper in, Mr. Bolten. Oh, I don't say that we require the money right now, but we will have to have it within, say, forty-eight hours." He smiled complacently.

Bolten sat as if stunned. He seemed unable to believe his ears. "You—you're calling—my paper?" he stammered incredulously.

"We are, unfortunately, compelled to take this action," was Brower's reply. "You can, as you intimated the other day, probably secure accommodation at some bank in Great Falls or Helena. We are allowing you time to do so, of course."

Bolten leaped to his feet in another spasm of rage. "This is another underhanded move!" he cried. "Owens was preaching about me working under cover, now, what's he doing?"

Brower shrugged and passed a sheet of paper across the desk. "Here is a list of your obligations, and the amounts due, Mr. Bolten. I, of course, am not alone responsible for the bank's action."

Bolten glanced at the sheet and stuffed it in an inside pocket. "You goin' to swing this club over everybody in the

east end?" he asked with a sneer. "This isn't banking business. It's a play to help that snake of an old Lafe to break me. But you can't do it, an' if the wool wasn't thicker than a pair of blankets over your eyes, you'd see that! This is plain dirt, Brower."

The banker ignored the insult in the other's eyes and tone. "All the loans this bank makes are made on the basis of adequate security," he said. "There is more money loaned to east-end stockmen, as you now see fit to style yourself, than to the stockmen in the west. With the prospect of rustling operations, cattle security automatically becomes uncertain. That would be the case in any event. But, in such case, the bank would endeavor to assist in stamping out the rustling. It would try, at least. But with the eastern half of the range separating from the western half, the dubious nature of your security out there becomes a certainty. There isn't room for two protective stockmen's associations on this range. If you were not so bull-headed and stubbornly set on your own personal desires, you'd acknowledge this. Acting as you are, the bank does not want your business. And you may just as well know here and now that this bank can easily survive the loss of all the east-end business. That's all I have to say to you, Mr. Bolten, and it won't do you any good to try to abuse me or any of the directors. So you can get it straight, I'll tell you that we're dumping you overboard. I guess you can understand that."

Bolten stood up, his face purple.

"You're nothing but a fop mouthpiece for Lafe Owens!" he managed to get out. "You haven't got a mind of your own. You're—why, you're a jumping jack, with Owens pulling the string. Have been all along, but I've been just dumb enough to be paying enough attention to my own business to take you for what you want people to think you are. You are——"

Brower rose suddenly and stepped briskly around the desk to confront the stockman.

"That's enough!" he said sharply, his eyes snapping. "You have no further business here unless you're prepared to take up your paper. When you come in again, you can attend to your business through the front window. You're the only man who has ever come into this bank and insulted me, and you're not going to have the chance to do it again!"

Brower threw open the door and motioned to Bolten to leave.

Whatever Bolten saw in the banker's eyes, it kept back the flow of expletives and profanity that was on his lips. He passed Brower with his eyes narrowed to slits, swept out of the bank, and charged for his room in the hotel like a bull, looking neither to right nor left. In the lobby he signaled to Fresee, and the foreman followed him upstairs.

"Owens is using the bank," snarled Bolten, as Fresee shut the door. "They've called my paper. It's all good as gold, but I've got to go to Great Falls or Helena an' make new banking arrangements." He calmed down somewhat. "Fresee, do you suppose Bianco intends to lay off my stock? You know, now that I think about it, I've never heard anything about his word being any too good—an' I haven't even got his word!"

"I don't think he'll bother us," said Fresee. "I told you I didn't believe Owens had kicked in, an' that last raid proves I was right. An' he wouldn't have told it at the meeting if he wasn't able to back up what he said. I looked for this bank move, too."

"Then why didn't you say something about it?" Bolten demanded; and was sorry he had asked the question.

"I just guessed at it," replied Fresee smoothly, "an' it isn't up to me to be telling you about finances. My work is on the range."

"That's so," nodded Bolten, mollified.

It was best that Fresee shouldn't get the idea in his head that he was too important. "Well, I'll have to start south this very night. I'll have to be in the Falls in the morning, an' maybe go on to Helena by train. I can't lose any time. I'll have to put off the organization of the east association until I get this bank thing straightened out. An' while I'm at it, I'm going to fix it for the whole east end."

"There's just one thing maybe I should say, although it's just a guess," crooned Fresee. "You understand, I'm thinkin' an' guessin' because I've got your interests at heart. I'd have to have, or I wouldn't have a job long. But—maybe this Owens has tried to queer things in the south. Maybe he thinks he can fix anything with money."

This opinion, instead of making Bolten angry, caused him to become thoughtful. He pursed his lips and remained silent for a spell.

"He'd have to try to queer the whole east range," he said at length, "an' those big fellows down there wouldn't stand for it. They won't let any feuds or association jobs interfere with good business. They'll probably jump at the chance to get in up here, for they've tried to buy that bank a couple times. No, if Lafe Owens tries that, I reckon he'll find he isn't such hot stuff with the big guns."

"He's sort of a big gun himself," Fresee observed.

"Go keep a lookout for that double crosser of an Amberg from the east edge of the range," Bolten ordered. "I want to see him as soon as he pulls away from that meeting. You can guess the inside of his play, I reckon." Bolten finished with a sneer. He did not see Fresee's eyes flash.

"They're Scots out there, an' Owens used his bank club," the Double B foreman observed.

"All right, get out an' keep an eye open for him," Bolten snapped. "An' tell Robertson where I am. I want to see him, too."

With Fresee gone, Bolten got what he wanted—which was half an hour alone. He paced the room thinking; thinking harder than he ever had thought in his life. He realized many of his mistakes and bit his lip as he thought how cleverly old Lafe had led him to his downfall at the meeting. He was no match for the older stockman when it came to wits, to the manipulation of words, to plotting. Moreover, for the first time he was genuinely incensed at Fresee, and he wondered with puckered brows if he hadn't listened too much and to his own disadvantage to the whisperings of his foreman; he even began to doubt his loyalty, and this startled him. He might have known that he couldn't win the coveted presidency of the association, on which he had set his heart for years, by threats. Confound his temper!

But the main subject of his thoughts in this half hour was his threat to form a new organization. He had to carry it out, now that he had made his declaration. And he had overlooked the mighty factor of the dollar. He was no match for the K-T owner in lands, stock, or general wealth. It did no good now to think of this important weapon Lafe had used. He, Bolten, was kicked out of the bank! He would have to appeal to southern bankers for help. Suppose they refused him? Perspiration broke out on Bolten's brow and he mopped it with his big bandanna. He would have to start for Helena this very night—before sunset, if possible. And then Bolten paused in the center of the room, struck by an idea. He could not call off the meeting of the eastern stockmen, but he believed he had fallen on a way to postpone it. That was it, postpone it! And he now also had an argument to present to Amberg and the group from the far east end.

He lighted a cigar and sat down, his

face glowing with satisfaction. When there came a rap at the door, he called out cheerily:

"Come in!"

It was impossible for him to resist a flash of anger when he saw Amberg, but in a moment his face had cleared and his look became almost benign.

"Sit down, Amberg," he invited, motioning the rancher to a chair. Then, "Steve, whatever made you fellows desert us to-day? Now, remember, you don't have to tell me unless you want to. But it got my goat, of course, an' I'd like to know."

Amberg shifted uneasily in his chair but steadied immediately and looked Bolten straight in the eyes.

"We're a bunch of small stockmen out there—just standing out there—an' we can't take any chances," he said. "We are not like you big fellows, who can do as you please. An' we believe in sticking to the ship when it's sailing along all right."

Bolten nodded affably. "Sensible, too. But you could have told me any fears you might have had, an' I would have wiped 'em out." He leaned forward in his chair. "You know the club Lafe Owens is trying to hold over some of you—er—smaller stockmen. It's a money club. He showed his hand today. Now, so long as the east end is going to break away from the present organization, we've all got to stand together. The old association couldn't do you any good, way out east there, with the new organization in between. You'd be cut off, don't you see? Oh, this isn't a threat, it's common sense."

Amberg's expression was puzzling, but Bolten saw that he had the east ender thinking.

"You might be caught between two fires out there," he suggested, with a wave of his cigar. "If trouble came along an' your stock was raided, you couldn't expect us to help you, if you didn't belong. Now, listen; this isn't a threat. It's just suggesting a possibility. Honestly, I don't believe the rustlers would bother you, because your outfits aren't big enough—yet. But if they did——" He gestured with his cigar again.

"We'll forget that because I don't think there's any such a chance. An' I'd be in favor of helping you out—if we could. Now there's another matter, Amberg, which I think is at the bottom of this bolt. By the way, have you joined the west enders?"

"Not yet," said Amberg. "In fact, the reason we haven't been asked to join is because we belong to the old association already."

Bolten nodded. "That's right," he agreed. He was pleased, though, to hear Amberg use the word "old" in connection with the matter. "Now for this other business, Steve." He leaned forward and tapped Amberg on the knee. "I saw it coming, but I couldn't make a move because I didn't know if Owens would spring it or not. It's the matter of money." He saw Amberg's eyes light with instant interest and knew he was on the right track. "With our own organization, it will be necessary for us to have our own banking arrangements. I am going to Helena this very night to make the necessary preliminary moves. Now, Owens said the Katy was behind this bank here and so on. That's all right. Every ranch in the east end will be behind our new banking connections. An' don't forget the Double B is no slouch. I have assets, an' plenty of 'em—so have Robertson an' the others. An' the southern banks will be tickled to death to get in up here. They've been trying to get in for years. Now we can protect you, Amberg, just as well as this tin bank here. For our connections will have a hundred times the capital an' assets that Brower's outfit can command. Think that over."

It was plain that Amberg was thinking, and thinking hard.

"We'll think it over," he told Bolten in sudden decision.

"Good!" exclaimed Bolten, beaming and holding out his hand. "Now, I'm going to postpone the first meeting of the new organization until I can get our financial arrangements made, an' in the meantime, don't make any moves, Steve. We'll give you the protection you need."

"I guess we'll be going back right away, anyway," said Amberg, rising and reaching for his hat.

When Robertson came in a few minutes later, he found Bolten pacing the room, an unlighted cigar in his mouth, his eyes glowing.

Bolten swung about sharply. "Anything new?" he asked.

"The meeting is over, with the same old crowd in the lead. Our bunch is going to stick, but—— Well, did Amberg come up?"

"Why did you hesitate?" Bolten demanded. "Yes, Amberg came up, an' I'll tell you about that later. Why the 'but'?"

"Some of the boys think we ought to have a little more time to organize—decide on officers, an' all that sort of thing. Of course, you'll be president, an'——"

"Just the thing I intend to do!" exclaimed Bolten. "I'm goin' to postpone the meeting until I can get this financial matter fixed up. Of course, we'll have to have time. Tell you what you do—get some of the boys up here an' I'll explain matters to 'em an' we'll postpone our meeting a week or two. Amberg an' his crowd are goin' to stick, sure as thunder. I told 'em they'd get no protection out there if they didn't, an' that I'd attend to financial matters."

"Not so bad," grunted Robertson. He was impressed by Bolten's enthusiasm. "Well, it won't take us long to have a kind of directors' meeting."

Within half an hour the meeting had been held and the east enders were starting for their homes. Amberg and his friends were the first to go. Bolten was attending to business matters in connection with his trip south, and Fresee was dispatched back to the Double B.

Lafe Owens was closeted in his room with Sheriff Rowan and several of the most prominent of the west-end stockmen. This conference was also attended by Brower from the bank.

Lafe Owens was talking. "I made public that statement that I was putting this cash into the bank because I felt sure it would reach the ears of Bianco. If no one else gets words to him, Fresee will. I'm betting on a hunch that Bianco will raid the bank. We'll be ready for him. I've an idea as to the range out by my place, too; an' that's why I'm asking for men to filter in out there for the doings. Now, my cards are on the table."

There followed a conference of some length during which plans were laid for ridding the range of the notorious outlaw who had invaded it. Then the sheriff, Brower, and the stockmen filed quietly out to put the plans into immediate operation.

Meanwhile, Fresee, riding eastward like the wind, looking back over his shoulder frequently, suddenly swerved from the road and dashed into the trees along the river. He waited, looking up and down the road from the shelter of the trees for some little time. Then he walked his horse down river to a shallow ford. He crossed here and emerged cautiously on the south bank. Again he inspected the lay of the land. It was nearly sunset before he started eastward on the south side of the river at a fast gallop. Very often he grinned and his eyes were sparkling pin points of light. He would not have grinned, and his eyes would have changed their expression, had he known that a rider was waiting atop a ridge at the edge of the bad lands toward which he was racing.

To be concluded in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

Cast-iron

By Seth Ranger

Author of "Swappin' Ends," etc.

RUBBING his fat hands, "Porterhouse" Remp observed the crowds pass through the gates of his rodeo. A white Stetson hat sat at a rakish angle on his massive head, a cigarette was stuck between his thick lips, and a watery blue eye peered from either side of a flattened nose. He breathed audibly with satisfaction as he calculated the day's receipts in a mumbled undertone.

"Fifteen thousand people, and they'll average two bucks a head. That's a total gate of around thutty thousand dollars—about the biggest gate a one-man-owned rodeo ever took in. And there's a reason, as the feller says."

He glanced at a billboard nailed to the arena fence. A cow-puncher appeared to be riding a wild horse, but to the practiced eye it looked as if the man was about to buck off. To the left was written in huge letters:

NEVER A HORSE THAT CAN'T BE RIDDEN!
NEVER A RIDER THAT CAN'T BE THROWED!

In front of the main gate a pasty-faced individual in gray suit, red necktie, and black Stetson was bellowing through a megaphone:

"Never a horse that can't be ridden; never a rider than can't be th'owed! Never a horse that can't be ridden; never a rider that can't be th'owed! Step right up, ladies and gentlemen. The seats are going fast. Inside, we are bringing together, Brimstone, the horse that's never been ridden, and 'Cast-iron Joe' Carter, the man that's never been th'owed!"

"A great combination," Porterhouse wheezed, "Carter and Brimstone." A trace of a sneer appeared on his hard face as he studied the crowd. "And I know what they're goin' for, too. The same reason that sent the old Romans to stadiums holds good to-day. They expect to see somebody get hurt. The

combination of a killer horse and a great bucker is packin' 'em in. They really don't want anybody to get hurt, but if somebody must be, then they want to be able to say they was there that time. Huh!"

He waddled toward the entrance, a regular mountain of a man who ate too much meat and whose blood pressure was dangerously high. Less than an hour ago he had eaten an inch-thick porterhouse steak, enough fried potatoes to satisfy two hungry cow-punchers and a vast assortment of vegetables. And it looked as if he could eat for some time to come on the margin of this day's profit. A cold-blooded man was Remp who paid his own bills and exacted his last cent from those who owed him. It was said he was "on the square," but because of his natural coldness toward mankind, people liked to think him crooked.

Dislike was apparent on many faces as he pushed his way through the milling mass. His pouchy cheeks shook like jelly. At his huge proportions, women shuddered, children stared, and men wondered how long it would be before he dropped dead.

He entered the dressing room under the grand stand and yelled, "Carter!" He glanced around in the manner of a man who was accustomed to instant service.

A slim cow-puncher appeared. He was dressed for the arena. There was nothing elaborate in his clothing. The boots were of the best material, but not gaudy; the chaps had seen much service, but could not be classed as worn out. The one dash of brightness in the man's costume was the silk shirt, a delicate blue in color. His Stetson had passed through a summer and a couple of hard winters, but it still kept his head cool and shaded his eyes.

"I'm here, Mr. Remp," he said briefly.

"And Irene?" Remp asked.

"She's here, too!" Carter answered. "We'll be ready when you want us."

"Your money is waiting for you," Remp said, as he continued his tour of inspection. His shows began on time. He permitted no delays. The crowd was never kept waiting between events.

Joe Carter, nicknamed "Cast-iron" because of his ability to withstand the rough treatment of the arena, hurried back to a secluded spot between the dressing rooms. A slender, blond girl awaited him. Everything about her suggested daintiness. Her small feet wore finely manufactured boots of expensive leather. She wore breeches and shirt of the most delicate pink. A black Stetson with silver band sat on her well-shaped head. She looked up at the man and something in her expressive blue eyes suggested that he had been interrupted by Remp and that she was now waiting for him to finish.

"Listen, Irene," he said, as though there had been no interruption, "you have a level head on your shoulders. You're no butterfly dolled up to look like a cowgirl and create atmosphere for Remp's shows. You know the chance you take every time you go into the arena. You're risking your life in the relays, and when you ride a bucker I'm sick all over until you're through. Why risk our happiness another year? Let to-day be the last ride. You're such a little thing, and sometimes I think those outlaw nags have snapped you in two." His strong face softened and filled with worshipful tenderness; his bronzed hands trembled as he reached out and drew her to him. "Call it quits after to-day, sweetheart, and we'll be married?" he asked.

There was silence, except for the hum of many voices and the scuffle of feet in the grand stand overhead. The girl considered many things in a practical way.

"Another year," she said at last, "will find us both better fixed."

Carter's face grew almost ashen. "I'm afraid of one more year," he cried in a voice filled with emotion. "I've seen too many others broken up by staying one year too long. One more year will pay for the ranch; one more year will bring up the bank account, and they stay that year. When it's over, one or the other is dead or a cripple."

"And you?" she asked quietly. "Even you could be hurt, Joe, then what?"

"I've got it figured out. If I ride Brimstone, I'm sitting pretty. I'm good for an exhibition ride, twice a day, in one of the big shows. After that, it won't be any trouble to play the lead in a couple of Western pictures. Then we'll take the clean-up and do what we meant to do in the first place—raise cattle. I've bought the McInnis ranch. About all I own, I guess, is the front gate; but it's a start, and Mack will give me every chance in the world. So will you ease my mind by making this your last ride?"

"All my life, Joe," she said, "I have taken chances. I'm going to take a chance on the two of us pulling through. I'll marry you whenever you say. This will be my last ride."

"And now that you've promised," Joe Carter told her, "I wish there was some way of skipping to-day's ride. I'm afraid something will happen at the eleventh hour to cheat us of our happiness. It's happened so often to our kind."

"Miss Irene! Miss Rawlins!" Some one was calling her to be ready for the relay.

She did not answer immediately. This was one of the sweetest hours in her life. She was not to be denied any of the sweetness. Her eyes filled with soft shades, mysterious promises to be filled in the future; almost leisurely her hands came up to his strong face, then she drew his head within reach of her lips. Joe Carter did the rest without breaking the spell. She drew back, rubbed her eyes as though her surroundings were half concealed in a fog, then with a happy smile hurried away.

Joe Carter's face was grave as he entered the arena. He could not shake off the sense of impending tragedy.

"'Dude' Martin and Sis rode too long, and Dude's ranchin' alone and his heart isn't in it," he reflected. "Yes, and there——" He stopped abruptly and watched Irene's fleeting figure. The relay race was on. The crowd was pulling for her to win. It never could quite understand where so slender a girl got so much strength. Big horses did her bidding. Well, so did big men! Carter, slender, tall, and deep-chested, was merely one of many who grew sentimental when they thought of the girl. Nor was Joe's the only serious face as she made lightning changes, almost lurched into the grand stand, and was off for the final lap and victory.

"One more contest, then she's through," the youth said with relief.

The events followed one another in swift succession. Occasionally, Remp barked a command, but mostly a wave of his hand was sufficient. This was organization of the highest type.

In mid-afternoon the announcer's voice droned:

"Irene Rawlins, world champion cowgirl, on Phantom—a good girl on a bad horse."

Joe Carter suddenly felt a lump in his throat. He galloped over and made certain that the saddle was properly cinched; that everything was right. Irene thrilled at the concern on his face, then flashed him a smile.

"Don't worry, Joe," she whispered, "nothing is going to happen."

"I know it!" He said it almost viciously, as if commanding Fate to stand back.

Phantom leaped sideways and collided with another horse. For an in-

stant the girl's leg was numb; then they were in the open. As he bucked, she dug her heels into his flanks and tightened her legs to hold on. The numb muscles relaxed and she found herself slipping, the numb foot was caught in the stirrup. To prevent being dragged, she caught the pommel of the saddle with one hand. Once, twice, three times, the bucking horse snapped the slender figure extended horizontally from his back. Three cow-punchers closed in, groping frantically to catch the girl. A fourth snatched Phantom's bridle and stopped the ride. The girl relaxed, slipped from their grasp, and dropped to the ground.

Stretcher bearers were there an instant later. The hushed crowd saw Cast-iron Carter follow the stretcher halfway across the arena. His face was contorted with anguish—the anguish of a man who has great strength, yet can not use it to advantage. His arms dangled helplessly at his side.

"Carter! You're next!"

It was Porterhouse Remp's voice breaking in heavily on his grief.

"I'm going with her," Carter snarled. "We've stayed with this game too long."

"Fifteen thousand people have paid to see you ride Brimstone, Carter. We are entertainers, the show must go on." Remp's voice was crisp and commanding.

Carter stopped at the gate leading from the arena. He watched the figure in pink disappear.

"A flower," he muttered, "stamped into the dust of the corral."

Remp seated himself on the rail and glanced toward the crowd.

"Well, it happened," he half snarled; "somebody was packed off, and you saw it. Yet, you'll be relieved if she isn't hurt. Crowds are queer. We're queer —we risk our necks to entertain them. Now they're watching Cast-iron Joe across the field. They're seeing a man that's never been throwed in an arena size up a horse that's never been ridden."

Carter looked a good deal of the time at Brimstone, but often he watched the little gate through which the stretcher-bearers, the doctor, or Irene must come. He knew the stretcher bearers would be asked questions by those sitting near the gate. If they smiled, then all was well; if their faces were grave, he would know she was badly hurt. Well, he would ride Brimstone and get it over with. He wished, though, the horse was nearer the gate. It was difficult to see at this distance. The outlaw was ready, now. The announced cried:

"Never a horse that can't be ridden; never a rider that can't be throwed."

He placed his foot in the stirrup and gently settled in the saddle. He gripped the reins in his right hand, then glanced toward the gate. The stretcher bearers had not returned. They must be needed back there in the emergency room.

"Ready!" he said.

As the blindfold was removed, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the four white-uniformed men return. They paused a moment at the gate. What were they saying? Dang the horse, anyway! He was twisting and turning so Carter could not see what was taking place at the gate. The crowd was yelling, except the few asking questions. Why didn't the mob shut up? Irene was lying there, crumpled; her dainty pink clothing dimmed with arena dust.

"Ride him, cowboy! Ride him! A cast-iron man on a cast-iron horse!"

Some one was shouting at him. He was not interested. That last jolt jarred his entire spine. Brimstone was sunfishing now. Well, let him. An overrated horse. Were the people at the gate smiling? It looked—— Joe Carter felt himself going through the air. A horse that had never been ridden had just thrown a rider who had never been thrown.

Brimstone whirled like a flash on the

fallen man. Joe leaped to his feet, but the horse struck him down before he could escape. The sharp hoofs drove viciously downward and struck. People turned their faces aside; cow-punchers came on a dead run. Some one roped the outlaw and nearly stood him on his head. He was dragged several yards on his side. And once more the stretcher men came on the run. They dropped their contrivance of canvas and poles, lifted the injured man to the center, then hurried away.

Porterhouse Remp's eyes strayed from Carter's figure to the grand stand.

"Again—it happened," he muttered. "You're getting your money's worth to-day. In fact, you owe me something. One of the greatest cowgirls and one of the greatest cow-punchers have been packed off. On with the next event!"

Under the grand stand a white-faced girl forgot her own injury and leaped from her cot.

"I'm all right," she cried, thrusting aside those who would have stopped her. "Who is it, Joe?"

"No, it's another cow-puncher," some one tried to tell her, but she was not to be denied.

"Don't lie! It's Joe!" She began to cry. "Joe! Joe! He trampled you. He didn't play the game fair. How I hate it all—the outlaw horses; the crowd that pays to see us hurt; the dust, yes, the very country itself!" She turned on the doctor. "Is he dead? Joe never looked like that. He looks pale and—terrible. You were right, sweetheart, we waited too long for our happiness. And now it's too late."

But it wasn't quite too late. Presently, Carter's eyes fluttered and she leaped to his side. The crowd above had forgotten them. They were laughing. Yes, they were getting their money's worth this day!

Carter's lips were moving. "What did they say about—her?"

"I'm all right, Joe! Look! See, I'm standing up!" Irene got up from her knees. It hurt her to do so She felt faint, but he saw her and a smile came to his pain-twisted face. After a while the doctor sent her away. Carter managed to speak.

"What's the verdict, doc?"

"You're a man. You want the truth. I'll tell it to you. You haven't much chance, Joe. And—you'll never ride again." The doctor continued his examination and found things even worse. "I'd put my affairs in order, if I were you."

"Will you tell Irene, when she can stand it?" Joe asked.

"If you wish." The doctor glanced at his patient, then hurried outside to the girl.

She listened quietly, but shook her head.

"You're wrong, doctor, dead wrong. He's going to live. I'm going to make him live. I can't let him die. Take him to the hospital. I'll be there. We're going to be married, and that'll help. I've put him off for a year now, but I won't put him off another day. Just before the ride I saw a little bit of heaven—when he showed his anxiety over me. I'm going to see more heaven —right here on the earth."

The doctor did not argue with her. She was badly shocked herself from the snapping in the arena, and now this misfortune. He stood by while the minister married them an hour later, he saw a strange expression come into Carter's face when Irene said, "Now I'm your wife, and we'll beat this game together." And the more he thought of the mysterious something, the more he wondered. But, anyway, Joe Carter would never ride again.

Time passed swiftly and of the thousands who saw Joe Carter and Irene Rawlins injured, few gave them a thought a month later. Occasionally,

some one would remark, "Wonder how that cow-puncher and the girl came out. Seems like I heard they were married. He was dying, they said. Wonder if he pulled through? They were a nice young couple."

There were many days when the cast-iron man was very low. The spirit was about gone. But the wife was always there, fighting. The flickering, indefinite thing called life would blaze up, then almost go out. But winter found Joe on the road to recovery. His powerful constitution had pulled him through, with the aid of his brave wife. Their money was gone, so Joe was moved to a county hospital and Irene went to work in a neighboring restaurant, where she waited at table and put bold and self-satisfied range gentlemen in their place.

There were long hours when Joe listened to the summing up of life by his fellow patients. Here was bitterness; there dejection, and occasionally hope. "Old Man" Seeley's viewpoint suited the buckaroo:

"I took my chances for high stakes and sometimes I won and sometimes I lost, and I got more out of life than the boys who stuck home and played safe. And when I struck it at Nome I didn't think that some day I'd be lyin' busted on an iron cot, a-cussin' cheap teeth that don't fit. And if I could get onto my feet, I'd take a chance once more, and I wouldn't play safe, and I wouldn't kick if luck was against me. And I'd have more fun than anybody." Then he would smile, turn over, and go to sleep.

Joe Carter would lie there and think of the future. He could not stand the thought of being supported by his wife. Irene was no quitter. She would stick to the last, he knew. But he would have to take a chance on something that would bring results. But always his thoughts went around in a circle. He was a cow-puncher—that was all he knew. And they had said he would never ride again.

But in time he walked. At first about the room, then around the hospital grounds, and finally he went home. It was a great day for them both.

"Tie into it, you kids," Old Man Seeley advised. "Take a chance. You've been through a lot. It's brought you nearer together. You're young, and you'll make the grade. If you go busted, cinch up your belts and start again."

The walk to the little apartment Irene had rented was referred to as their honeymoon trip. It was eight blocks long and walking saved cab fare.

They spent the mornings together. Irene went to work at eleven o'clock; returned at three, and was on duty again from six to nine o'clock in the evening.

Each day the morning walk was longer. Once Irene caught Joe's arm and started him down a side street when their path led to a corral in which stood several riding horses. She was a second too late, for he had seen them. The expression in his eyes brought a lump to her throat, but he merely smiled and said:

"Let's look 'em over. It'll hurt, but the pleasure will be greater than the pain, as the monkey said when he embraced the porcupine."

They leaned on the top rail and watched the horses for nearly a half hour, then retraced their steps in silence. Two weeks later, they passed the spot again. Irene watched Joe enter the corral and rub a bay horse's nose, then prepare to climb onto his back. She pressed her fingers against her lips in alarm. "Don't try it," she pleaded then. She did not add that she was afraid he could not bear the disappointment if he failed. Only a native of a cow country could appreciate what mounting a horse meant to him.

"Once upon a time," he said, with a

reassuring smile, "an Englishman bet an Irishman he could not drink a quart of whisky without stopping. The Irishman excused himself for several minutes, then returned, and accepted the bet. The whisky was produced and the Irishman drank the quart. 'But,' inquired the Englishman, 'why did you go outside before taking the bet?' 'Well,' the Irishman explained, 'I sneaked out to see if I really could drink a quart without stopping, and when I found that I could I knew the bet was a cinch!'" Joe smiled. "Get the idea?"

"Sure, Joe. You've already been on that horse's back," she answered.

He leaped up and was on. "See? Almost as good as I used to be!"

"Yes," she answered, though she could have cried at the difference, "just as good as you ever were, Joe."

Summer was nearly gone when Joe, calling at the restaurant for his wife, saw Porterhouse Remp sitting at the counter. He appeared to be as businesslike and callous as of old, and fatter than ever. Between bites, he carried on a mumbled conversation with Irene. He had not offered to aid them in any manner, nor did he do so now. He owed them nothing legally, and they understood it.

"Great show," he said; "the crowd got more'n its money's worth. That advertising packed 'em in, too. Never a horse that can't be ridden. Never a rider than can't be throwed." He looked around and saw Carter for the first time. "Hello, Joe!" he cried. This was followed by an appraising glance. "I was telling Irene here it was a great show. Too bad you people ain't riding any more. You made a name for yourself."

"Shut up," Joe snarled, "don't tempt us."

The big man shrugged his shoulders and tackled a wedge of pie. Presently he finished, and paid his check.

"Well, so long," he said.

"Working again this morning?"

For weeks now Joe had asked that question and always received the same answer.

"Yes, Joe, in the kitchen. Extra money that'll tide us over until you can find something to do."

A bitter smile played about Joe's lips. "Nobody wants me. I'm losing my manhood." He did not tell Irene so, but she seemed rather impatient of late, as if she were tired of their life together.

After she was gone, he brooded about it. Abruptly he got to his feet and started downtown. "I'm going to drag her out of there. She's working too hard!" He entered the back door and asked for his wife.

"She don't come on until around eleven," the cook said.

"She hasn't been working extra in the kitchen these last few weeks?" Joe demanded in surprise.

"No!"

He walked home. A queer sensation had gripped him. So that explained it! She wanted to get away from him. The next moment he rejected the thought as treason. "What if she did? She's done more than her share. Tied up for life with a thing like me!" He felt his arms and legs. They were as hard as ever, almost as strong, but inside the doctors told him it was different. The horse's hoofs had torn things loose. At this point they would talk in technical terms. "No," Joe repeated again and again to hear himself say it, "she still loves me. She'll stick!" But he groped for the answer to her deception and unexpectedly found it. He opened an old trunk in which she had packed their riding things. His were there, but hers were gone. Fear gripped him.

He borrowed an old horse and walked it toward the race-track grounds on the outskirts of the city. In his eagerness, he began urging the animal to hurry and presently they were galloping. He looked

through a crack in the fence and saw Remp tilted back in a chair. Irene had just finished riding a relay race on his string. She said something to Remp, he nodded without emotion, and watched her disappear into the dressing rooms.

Joe was waiting when she emerged. For a moment they looked at each other with unfriendly eyes.

"You can't do it, Irene!" exclaimed Joe. His voice was partly commanding, partly pleading. It was thick with emotion.

"We're cow-country people," she replied, "it's the only thing we know. I'm tired of serving people; of answering the wise cracks of Tom, Dick, and Harry; of telling all three I don't want to go to the motion-picture show with them or to the dance Saturday night. McInnis is still holding his offer open. He hasn't taken advantage of our trouble and foreclosed. Remp made me a good offer. I'm going to play the Northwest rodeos, Sumas, Ellensberg, Calgary, and Pendleton, then come back and join his outfit in the Southwest. We'll open here."

"I'm not going to have you broken up," Joe growled. "I'll figure some way out of it. I'll ride myself first."

It was Irene's turn to grow alarmed. "You can't, Joe, it'd put you in the hospital again."

"It might not," he answered, "the doctors might be dead wrong."

"Anyway," she added, "it's too late. I've already signed with Remp. You know him. He keeps his promises, and holds others to theirs. I couldn't get around it if I wanted to—and I don't. Remember what Old Man Seeley used to say—take a chance. He was right. Now, let's forget the whole business. I'm going to be careful in the relays, and I'll only ride exhibition buckers."

But Joe knew differently. She would put everything she had into every contest. She would be out to win—that was her way.

He pondered on the matter some time, then called on Remp. "I don't want Irene to ride again," he informed the showman.

Porterhouse had just dined heartily, but that had not mellowed him to any extent.

"Outside of you, Joe," he said, "your wife is the biggest attraction I could sign up."

"What do you want to call it off?"

"More money than you could dig up, Joe." Remp's eyes narrowed somewhat. "If you'd agree to ride Brimstone when we show in this man's town, I could make you a good proposition."

"It'd put me back in the hospital again," Joe answered, after a moment's thought.

"Prob'ly it would, but what would it cost to spend six months, even, in the hospital?" As usual, Remp was figuring it out in terms of dollars and cents.

"Fifteen hundred dollars, possibly only a thousand," Joe replied.

"I can see twenty thousand dollars this coming year for you if you'd ride Brimstone. When my advertisements appear, every person who saw you buck off and get stomped on, will remember you. Americans like to see a man come back. They'll all be on hand, pulling for you to ride the killer. There won't be even standing room. I'll give you five thousand dollars if you'll do it! If you ride the horse, you're good for at least fifteen-thousand in motion-picture contracts. Even if you didn't get a contract, and even if the hospital bill was fifteen hundred dollars, you'd be thirty-five hundred to the good. Think it over."

Remp watched the desperate man weigh confinement, pain, and injury, possible death, against dollars and cents.

"If you'll cancel Irene's contract; advance me five hundred dollars to get in shape, and keep my part in the affair secret until you start advertising, I'll do it," Joe agreed.

Remp's eyes lighted with excitement as if this were something he had carefully planned long ago and had at last succeeded in accomplishing.

"I'll draw up the contract right now," he cried. "Man! Man! You're going to pack 'em in. And there's always the chance you won't go to the hospital." He stuck a cigarette in his mouth, gripped a pen in his fat fingers, and commenced to draw up the agreement.

Joe walked over to the window. It was great to feel well, to be able to walk about and ride once more. He felt like his old-time self, but the doctors insisted he should not be guided by his physical feelings. The muscles and ligaments were not as strong as they should be and could never stand the shocks the body receives from riding an outlaw horse. He sighed heavily when he thought of the long days in bed. Abruptly, he jerked the pen from Remp's fingers and scrawled his name on the bottom of the sheet.

"I had to do it or I might have backed out," he explained; "now go ahead and finish up."

Remp completed the agreement, then wrote out a check. Joe pocketed it and started for the door. Just before going through it, he spoke a final word.

"I'll show up a day before I'm to ride. Don't worry about me. I'll be there."

He sent four of the five hundred dollars to McInnis with a note that he would be along soon, then he returned home and began to pack.

When Irene arrived that night, her face was set in cold lines.

"Remp broke the agreement," she said, "and, of course, you had a hand in it."

"Yes, I asked him to do it. He did. Maybe he could see you, sweetheart, as I saw you—being whipped apart by that outlaw horse, while frantic cow-punchers tried to reach you——" A shade of agony passed over his face, and Irene softened somewhat. A girl could not be very resentful when a man so loved her, when the picture of something that had happened months ago was still so vivid that it hurt.

"What'll we do?" she asked.

"McInnis will give us every chance in the world. I hit a friend for a hundred dollars to take us to the ranch. We're drifting in the morning and will try and make a go of it."

She watched him for a long time, but his face betrayed nothing.

"All right," she said, "but I can't believe Remp is getting soft-hearted in his old age. There's something fishy about his turning me loose."

The McInnis ranch would completely fill the dream of the most imaginative cow-puncher. There were broad valleys between rolling hills, and adjoining was a government range that could be leased. The stock was of the finest breed, and a good income could be made from a small dairy herd. A small band of sheep helped out with two crops a year—lambs and wool. Barbed-wire fences inclosed the entire ranch. A stream had been dammed to supply water during the dry spells. Several crops of alfalfa were cut each year and stored in the huge, red barns. The ranch house was very old. Its thick, adobe walls kept out the cold in winter and the heat in the summer. The ranch house, and vegetable and fruit acreage adjoining were surrounded by high shade trees. There was a well which supplied ice-cold water when the supply from the dam was warm in summer.

Joe and Irene stopped their horses and looked down on the ranch for a full five minutes. This was what each had instinctively thought of as home long before they had become engaged. She had planned to buy it from her earnings—if she survived the conflict of the arena. He had had a similar ambition.

"You see, Joe, why I signed with Remp again? This is the only place

where we'll ever be entirely happy. I had to take a chance," Irene explained.

"True," he agreed, "but you couldn't enjoy it flat on your back or moving about in a wheel chair."

"I don't know but what I'd sooner live here as a cripple than in town with my health and strength," she answered, and she meant it.

McInnis, of indefinite age, as so many ranchers appear to be, greeted them.

"It's all yours," he said, "I've moved to a little room where I won't be under foot much."

"Thanks," Joe said.

In the minds of the young people as well as the old Scot was the thought that it would take thousands of dollars from the outside to make a go of it. They could never be successful on a shoe string. Interest charges and even normal reverses would keep them down. But McInnis had resolved to give them every chance, anxious as he was to leave the country and join his wife, who could no longer stand the climate.

Three weeks before Joe was due to return to town, he mounted a broncho and touched him with the spurs. All his old riding skill was there. He, as usual, was comfortably ahead of the horse in the mental conflict that accompanies the physical. As a result, he was ready for each new trick. It was only when Joe came down hard in the saddle that he noticed the difference. He at first felt numb, then slightly sick.

"I can last a while," he growled, "but when it's over I'll have to go to the hospital. But all this is worth it. And one thing, when I go into the arena, I won't be worrying about Irene. It was watching those stretcher men instead of Brimstone that caused my trouble. He caught me off guard."

Posters with Remp's advertising crept across the country. The largest advertisements were on the main highways, but there were smaller sheets and cards plastered on barn walls and convenient trees along side roads. Irene saw the familiar colors at a distance and galloped over for closer inspection. Mild interest changed to distinct shock, then sickly dread.

"Why did he do it?" she cried. "Oh, why did he?" But of course she knew. To keep her out of the arena. "And Remp," she panted with anger, "let me off for the greater attraction—Joe. The cruel brute! I'll stop this, if it's the last thing I do." Tears filled her eyes, the letters blurred, but she could still read them:

NEVER A HORSE THAT CAN'T BE RIDDEN.
NEVER A RIDER THAT CAN'T BE THROWED.
CAST-IRON JOE CARTER
Plays a return engagement with the man killer
BRIMSTONE.

"And the price of admission has gone up," she added, as she finished reading the poster. "He'll get it! They'll come to see what they saw last year—Joe crushed under Brimstone's hoofs."

And Irene Carter fought as only a desperate woman can fight for what she loves. She shuddered when Joe informed her that they could pay a fifteen-hundred-dollar hospital bill and have thirty-five hundred to the good.

"And that's where the five hundred dollars came from—advance money from Remp?"

"Yes. Remember, Irene, that was the only way I could force him to release you. That was the most important thing to me."

She went to Remp, but the showman was prepared for the meeting. "The doctors might be wrong," he insisted. "Joe looks as good as ever. He always was a strong man."

"He's not the man he once was," she answered. "Oh, don't try to cheer me up. For a lot of money your making a Roman holiday for the crowd and Joe is to be thrown to the lions."

She might as well have tried to move

the big man from his chair by her own frail strength as to change his decision by pleading. Defeated, she made a final appeal to Joe.

"No," he said, "I'm going to see it through."

"Through!" she whispered the word. "Then, Joe, I'm through. Go ahead; make your ride; spend your days in the hospital; but when you come out, you won't find me at the ranch."

"Do you—mean that?" he managed to ask.

"Absolutely."

And he knew that the determination that made her risk life and limb in the arena could see her through almost any course she decided to take.

He smiled and held out his hand. "Good-by, sweetheart," he said.

She took his hand. Her fingers were cold. "Good-by, Joe," she answered. "I can't stay to see it. It'd hurt too much." Their hands relaxed, their fingers lingered a moment in a light touch as if reluctant to part; then she was gone.

Once more the crowd was milling its way into the grand stand. The bleachers had been filled for two hours. Remp waddled through the gate, his eyes glittering with satisfaction, the usual cigarette in his mouth. He had had a tough session with the doctor that morning. The doctor had lost and had made every preparation for an emergency operation at the hospital following Joe's attempt to ride the outlaw.

"Packed 'em in again!" Remp muttered. "The people don't want anybody hurt, but if somebody's going to be smashed up, they want to be able to say they were there when it happened. They got more'n their money's worth last year. This year they shouldn't have as much as their money calls for. That's only fair." He looked into the dressing room.

"Ready, Joe?"

"Whenever you call me," Joe answered. He did not care whether he lived or died now. But he was keeping faith with Remp and the crowd. "Without Irene——" He sighed heavily and did not finish.

Remp waddled on to the barns. Two men were guarding Brimstone at his orders. One could never tell about a desperate woman. She might do anything. Might even give the outlaw something that would kill him. She would consider such an act justified if it was to save the life of some one she loved. Her reasoning might be dead wrong from Remp's viewpoint, but it was something he would be foolish to ignore.

"How's Brimstone?" he asked.

"Meaner than ever," one of the men answered.

The outlaw bared his teeth and screamed. Remp fumbled in his pocket and brought out several lumps of sugar. The horse accepted them. The man smiled. You could buy a crowd with the offer of excitement, the possibility of injury; a man with the offer of money, because that would get him something he wanted. And you could buy an outlaw horse with sugar. As long as the sugar lasted, there would be peace in the stable. Remp waddled away.

"But you can't buy the real love of a woman," he muttered. "Irene wouldn't have given her consent for Joe to ride if I'd offered her the whole show. So—I offered her nothing and stood guard."

He puffed up the grand-stand stairs and settled himself in his box. The seat he had reserved for Irene was empty. He was not surprised. It would remain empty.

Ten minutes passed, then the announcer shouted: "In the center of the arena, Brimstone, the horse that has never been ridden. Last year he nearly killed Cast-iron Joe Carter. Joe is back,

determined to ride him again. Remember! Never a horse that can't be ridden. Never a rider that can't be throwed."

Remp eased his fat hand into his coat pocket and leaned back. His fingers came in contact with a lump of sugar. He often ate sugar when relaxed. He put the lump to his lips, changed his mind, and dropped it to the ground in front of the box. Joe Carter should be along any moment now.

They had sent for Joe. Dressed in the same clothes he had worn a year ago, he emerged from the dressing room. His face was that of a man who did not care. His eyes scowled at the wooden walls as he walked along. He looked at the corner where he had stood with Irene a year ago. That day he had been lifted to the heights. Now——

"Irene!"

She had stepped from the shadows. Her arms went about his neck.

"I'm sorry, and I've come back to tell you so," she whispered. "Last year you lost, trying to ride, worrying about me. I can't let you go worrying about me this year. I'm with you, Joe, for all time, regardless of what happens. I can't watch you, but I'll stay here, waiting. I'll know by the scuffle of feet; by their cheers and by that something a crowd sends forth, what is happening. Those creatures will let me know. Good luck, Joe!"

He trotted into the arena and she heard the mighty cheer roll over the stands.

"Still," she whispered, "it's not they're not sympathetic, it's because they don't know the story behind the scenes. Now, they're quiet!"

Her heart was pounding wildly. The tenseness of the stands affected her. She wanted to scream. Two forces seemed to be in conflict within her. One willed that she remain away; the other forced her slowly under the stands, then to the walk, and finally on to the gate through which the stretcher bearers must come. They were occupying their regular position on the turn of the track. The doctor had joined them—something unusual for him.

Irene looked across the arena. There he was, sitting on Brimstone's back; erect as ever, but not quite as bronzed as last year. Those long months in the hospital had taken a toll in color, too. It seemed an age before they pulled off the blindfold. The outlaw jerked his head around as if to snatch the rider from his back with his long, yellow teeth. A cry of approval came from a thousand throats as Joe drove the spurs into the animal. Brimstone leaped and came down stiff-legged. The spurs went in again. And again the horse, as if sensing the man's weakness, came down with a jar. His four hoofs seemed to come almost together, his back was arched high, and he jerked downward with his head to snap those tightly held reins and help unseat the rider.

Each shock drove the color from Joe's face.

"Poor kid," Irene whispered. "There he goes. Well, I'm glad. Ride in, you fools, in case he bucks off!" she exclaimed warningly.

But Joe did not buck off. He regained his balance and finally succeeded in changing the animal's tactics. Brimstone resorted to sunfishing, twisting, and turning, with only an occasional buck. The mighty throng came to its feet with a roar of applause.

"He's riding him!" cried the thousands. "He's riding him!" echoed thousands of others.

The judges waited a moment. The rider had suddenly grown weak. He was swaying in the saddle, sticking on instinctively. No, he didn't buck off. Again he recovered. The gun was lifted and fired. Two riders galloped in, and Joe threw both arms around the

neck of one and let the outlaw leap from under him.

"Quick!" he panted. "To the gate!"

The cow-puncher's strong arm went around Joe and he galloped toward the gate. A few feet from the stretcher bearers the man released his grip. Joe saw a sea of faces looking at him; heard their roars of approval. Everything was blurring, but in the midst of the blur one face stood out distinctly between the posts of the gate. He kept his nerve, passed from view of the crowd and collapsed into Irene's arms.

The doctor came on the run and helped the slip of a girl to carry her big husband. They laid him down under the stands on a cot. Overhead sounded the shuffle of many feet, with an occasional dash of laughter or a sudden cheer. The show was going on. Joe's lips moved.

"Five thousand clear! No hospital this time. No pains inside, doctor, just a little weak to stand much rough stuff; not quite the old cast-iron man, but coming back strong. Five thousand clear; a motion-picture contract, maybe some exhibitions; then the ranch, and you, Irene. That's it, smile. I'm just tired."

"Just tired," muttered the doctor, "that's all, but if the outlaw had lasted a little longer, then——" He did not finish his verdict, it was not necessary. He returned to the stands to sit, watch, wait, and be ready if wanted. But his thoughts were elsewhere.

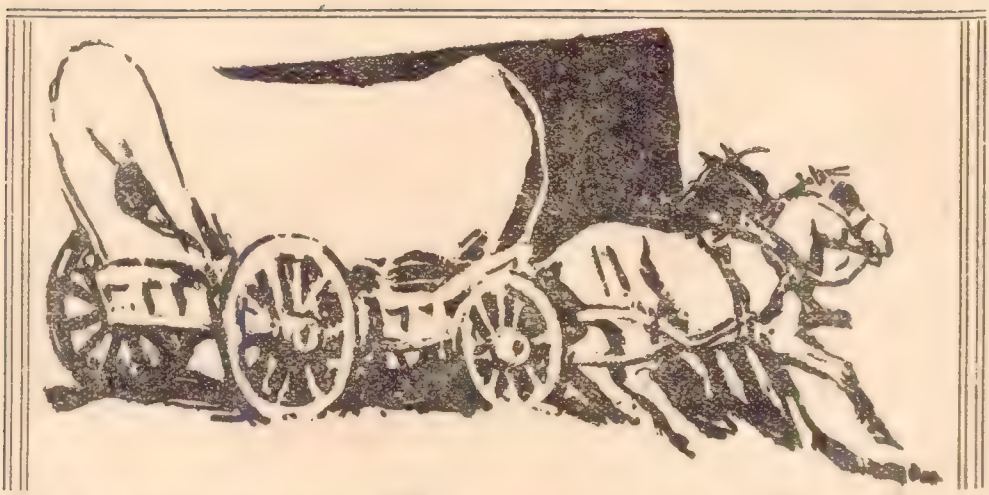
Porterhouse Remp waddled to the dressing rooms. Neither Joe nor Irene noticed him.

"Couple of doves," he muttered; "well, they've got it coming to them." He tossed the cigarette aside, and a soft smile banished much of the harshness of his heavy face. Presently he chuckled as the crowd cheered. "Porterhouse Remp always gives 'em their money's worth, but no more. Got more'n their money's worth last year when a bad horse trampled a man worryin' about his girl. All square now." He was laughing at the crowd. "And you'll never know that it's all square between you and that young couple. They'll never know, either—only Porterhouse Remp will know that he's got a soft spot in his make-up, and that he fed Brimstone enough doped sugar to make it a fair contest between a sick man and the horse."

TWO TEXAS DOGS

THE dog has once more proved that he is man's best friend. In this case there were two of the canine species, and the place was Sweetwater, Texas, where both of the dogs made the front page of the local newspaper. In the first instance, a doctor, making a call at one in the morning, was forced to stop his car by a dog, which obdurately refused to move from the road.

Investigation proved that, at the side of the road, a few feet away, was a shivering, crying baby, utterly helpless, since it was only eighteen months old. The other dog, whose actions indicate an intelligence almost human, was found standing guard over the unconscious form of its master on the ground beside his car.



Pioneer Towns of the West

(Hutchinson, Kansas)

By Duane Clark

HUTCHINSON is located on the Arkansas River in Reno County, Kansas. It is the county seat of Reno County.

Hutchinson was founded in June, 1871, by C. C. Hutchinson, and the following year became a city of the third class. March 26, 1886, it became a city of the second class, and it graduated to one of the first class in 1911.

The early history of Hutchinson tells of the first fire apparatus being a yoke of oxen and a plow. The first ordinance provided means for getting smoke out of buildings; the second regulated the running of stock in the city limits, and the third prohibited the use of firearms in the city.

The population numbers twenty-nine thousand, ninety-five per cent of which are native Americans, four per cent colored, and one per cent Mexican.

What was once a prairie has developed into a prosperous and steadily growing manufacturing and distributing center for western Kansas, northern Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, and eastern New Mexico and Colorado. There are now sixty manufacturing plants, with an annual output valued at seventeen million dollars, which is proof of the substantial growth of the city.

Hutchinson's industries include three salt mining and processing plants, with a combined annual capacity of three million barrels; four flour mills, with total annual capacity of seven million bushels; nine grain elevators, with total capacity of three million bushels; two packing plants; four cold-storage plants; one soda-ash plant; two large foundaries and metal processing plants; an oil-field supply house and machine shop; five creameries, which make over eight million pounds of butter yearly; one of the largest candy factories in the West; a petroleum refinery, and a combined harvester factory and large harvesting-machinery assembling and distributing plant, besides many smaller and varied industries.

The city is the hub of western Kansas oil development. Proven fields have been established north, south, southeast, and southwest of Hutchinson.

Firms catering to the oil-field business have established their factories at Hutchinson.

An abundance of cheap industrial gas is insured by the connection of the local system with the Amarillo gas field. The United Power & Light Corporation has recently completed a million-dollar extension to its plant in order to accommodate the growing demands of Hutchinson's industries. With more than ninety-five per cent of the population native American stock, an adequate supply of efficient workers is assured. Healthful and congenial living conditions prevail in Hutchinson.

Hutchinson's Chamber of Commerce has seven hundred active members, who are constantly endeavoring to maintain a constructive policy of industrial, commercial, and civic development.

Located at the gateway of the great American wheat belt, Hutchinson is rapidly growing as a wholesale distributing center for central Kansas and the Southwest. Seven hundred commercial travelers make their homes in Hutchinson.

The retail service compares favorably with that of much larger cities. There are more than two hundred stores, ranging from large department stores to small individual ones. There are three national and three State banks, and one trust company. Also, there are three building-and-loan associations, and two finance companies specializing in installment paper.

Six railroad lines serve Hutchinson. The Santa Fe has three lines. Then there are the Rock Island, the Missouri Pacific, and the Arkansas Valley Interurban, which is electric. Both the Santa Fe and Rock Island are transcontinental lines. A number of fine highways connect the city with outside points as well. The city is situated on U. S. Highway 50 South, and Kansas Highways 17 and 96. U. S. Highway 50 South is also known as the New Santa Fé Trail. It is used by thousands of transcontinental tourists because it traverses the most populous part of the State, with the finest hotel service, and because it is the logical natural coast-to-coast route. Seventy-five miles of paved highway radiate from Hutchinson besides many gravel-surfaced roads.

Hutchinson's principal agricultural crop is wheat. Thirty million bushels are shipped annually through the grain markets of the city. Extensive cattle ranches are found in the western and southwestern counties of Kansas which are served by Hutchinson. The dairy and poultry industries are fast coming to the fore in importance. An increased diversity of crops is being promoted, including corn, alfalfa, and a variety of sorghum grains. The value of dairy and poultry products marketed through Hutchinson dealers exceed nine million dollars yearly.

The climate here is favorable to industry, commerce, and agriculture. Kansas is commonly called "a land of just enough winter." It has few short cold periods and the rest of the time long stretches of delightful weather.

Among the clubs in Hutchinson are the Coöperative, Cosmopolitan, Exchange, Kiwanis, Lions', Rotary, and Elks'. Women's organizations include the Business and Professional Women's Club, and the Women's Civic Center Club. Some of these clubs have their own buildings.

The public-school system consists of a senior high school, two junior high schools, and ten grade schools, with an enrollment amounting to six thousand. A new senior high-school building large enough to accommodate a junior college is in process of construction. Besides these schools, Hutchinson has the Breeze College and the Salt City Business College.

Twenty-nine churches represent nearly all denominations. The Y. M. C. A. has a fully equipped building. Two

hospitals, St. Elizabeth's Mercy, and Grace, have a combined capacity of one hundred and sixty beds.

Two papers, *The News,* and *The Herald,* have a combined circulation of over twenty-five thousand.

Hutchinson has four public parks covering a total of two hundred and twenty-five acres. Carey Park has a golf course, baseball grounds, and a playground for children. Near by is the Beck Zoo.

Hutchinson is also a home city, for an unusually high percentage of residents own their houses. All these are fronted by well-kept lawns and present an attractive appearance.

Everything taken into consideration, Hutchinson is a well-balanced city, its growth and permanence proving this.

In Next Week's Issue, "DOG HEROES," by KENNETH GILBERT. A dog lovers' delight.

FAVORITE MEXICAN AND INDIAN EDIBLES

THE chayote is, to most people, a rather new addition to the bill of fare, and at first sight the ultimate consumer may wonder whether the printer has not stumbled between "coyote" and "chaotic." But "chayote" is right, and the fruit is well known and loved in Mexico, as well as in more distant countries, though the first shipment of it north from Florida was only recently made.

The chayote is the fruit of a West Indian vine, and somewhat resembles the squash in appearance, though its flavor has been compared to many delectable things, including roast oysters and sweet potatoes. The vine on which the fruit grows is used as a vegetable, and in some places as a greenery, while farmers say that it has even proved a satisfactory fodder. The chayote varies in size, but some specimens have attained a weight of two pounds or more. The fruit has many names. In the English colonies it is called "vegetable pear"; in the French, *christophine;* and in the Spanish West Indies, *chocho, chuchu, cahiota,* and *pepinella.* The fruit is now cultivated in Louisiana and California as well as in Florida.

The cactus is perhaps more familiar to the housewife than the chayote, and the fruit of the saguaro cacti are regarded highly by the Papago Indians, who share the universal love of humanity for sweet things. The red fruit of the cacti is filled with a sweet pulp, and the tree serves the Indians of the desert as a sugar bowl. The fruit is cooked and the juice strained and boiled again and again until it becomes a sirup. The Indian women pour the sweet liquid into jars and seal them shut, just as their white sisters do with preserves and jams. The juice when sealed and properly prepared is said to keep in good condition for about a year.

Breed of the Wolf

By Howard E. Morgan

Author of "Mighty Hunters," etc.

FOR two days and two nights Kadak, the wolf dog, had followed Sime Huber, sleeping when the man slept, traveling when he traveled. Ordinarily, the old prospector would have soon become aware of this silent supervision; just now, however, Sime Huber was a madman. That is, he was gold mad. A rich strike had been made at Norton, in the northern wilderness two hundred and fifty miles away. Sime Huber's every waking thought revolved about that golden star which drew him like a magnet, as the promise of gold had always drawn him since he had washed his first handful of dust out of a creek bottom thirty years before.

Old Sime had started out of Carder's Notch along with some sixty other gold-mad pilgrims. He had easily outdistanced them. With luck, he told himself, he would be one of the first to arrive at the new diggings. Which was well, for in many ways this particular venture was one of the longest chances Sime Huber had ever taken. He was, in the first place, no longer young; and Norton was well over two hundred miles from civilization. In the second place, he had no money; his entire worldly wealth was in that light pack upon his back. The bitter northland winter was due to break almost any day. Game was scarce; moreover, he had very little ammunition for his old rifle. All these things combined to render it imperative that Sime Huber reach Norton at the earliest possible moment; and it was no less imperative that he locate gold there, at least enough to purchase the necessary supplies—and perhaps a dog team—to get him back to Carder's Notch.

These were the reasons why Sime Huber had been traveling on an average of sixteen hours out of every twenty-four. And in his preoccupation with these serious matters he failed to notice Kadak's presence.

Fate decreed, however, that the man and the dog were to become very well acquainted before that long and arduous journey was done.

Kadak had lived the life of a lone wolf ever since he could remember. Somewhere in the dim distant past, far

beyond the point that his brute memory carried, there had been men. These were the men to whom his mother—a renegade sheep dog—had introduced him when he was a shaggy puppy. Later, after his mother's death, and when his father—none other than King Lobo himself—had fled from the wrath of man into the untracked Northern wilderness, he had reverted to the life of his paternal forbears, who had been the huge black timber wolves of southern Canada. Even so, however, Kadak was half dog. Sime Huber was the first white man he recalled having seen. There was none of the wolf in him as he followed the man. His bushy tail drooped like a dog's tail, and at frequent intervals, particularly around meal times, he whined—like a dog. At such times he yearned to join the man, to burrow into the snow beside the fire and bask in that vague but pleasant something which somehow surrounded him.

It was midmorning of the fourth day when it happened. It was because he was so wrapped up in the man that Kadak blundered into Neetah, the wolverine. Now, in common with all other wilderness dwellers, Kadak hated and feared the carcajou, that strongest and most vicious fighter of the entire weasel family. Always before he had avoided them. He would have avoided Neetah now if it had been possible to do so. It so happened, however, that as he rounded an angle in a rocky wall, he came face to face with the wolverine. Not alone that, but he was cornered in a shallow, V-shaped depression in the wall.

As luck would have it, Sime Huber stopped fifty yards from the scene of the prospective battle to mend a broken strap on his snowshoe. He heard the first hissing growl of the carcajou. He heard the throaty challenge of Kadak. He reached the scene just in time to see the big wolf dog catch the wolverine by the loose skin of its back and shake the snarling, hissing beast as a terrier might shake a rat. Next instant, however, the wolverine had twisted about and raked the dog from shoulder to rump with its eviscerating claws. Kadak relinquished his hold and sprang away.

Sime Huber's little black eyes were bright. All his life he had hoped to witness a fight between a carcajou and a wolf. Now, apparently, that wish was to be fulfilled. But what a wolf! Never had Sime Huber seen a wolf like this one. King Lobo, according to reports, had weighed one hundred and twenty pounds. Old Sime was sure that the big gray-black wolf out there in the open weighed easily one hundred and fifty. But was that sturdy-limbed, shaggy-haired beast a wolf? Huber's leather-colored face wore a puzzled frown. Kadak did not fight like a wolf. He fought like a dog. Like a combination of bull terrier and collie. He did not use the downward slashing attack of the wolf. Instead, he lunged straight at his opponent, like the terrier; then sprang away as a collie might have done.

Huber's heart beat fast as the wolf dog, cornered by its enemy, was beaten to the red snow by a slashing blow. With teeth clicking, the carcajou threw itself at Kadak's throat. But the wolf dog, although badly hurt, was not yet seriously weakened. Like a raging fury, Kadak—his jaws wide open, a red foam trickling from his muzzle—met the wolverine face to face. The dog's razor-edged teeth came down with a sickening scrunch over the wolverine's muzzle. A squall of pain and rage came from the carcajou. Next instant, the powerful beast sprang about, dislodged its enemy, and with a slapping blow sent that one-hundred-and-fifty-pound bulk hurtling into a brier tangle.

Right at that point, Sime Huber told himself, the average wolf would have quit. At heart most wolves are cowards. They will fight when cornered; when the opportunity presents itself,

they will almost invariably run. Kadak, however, although terribly mauled, did not run. Limping painfully, the big dog scrambled out of the brier tangle and slowly approached the waiting wolverine. True to its nature, the carcajou did not hesitate for long. With a queer sort of waddling jump, the beast started toward its enemy. And then, to Sime Huber's astonishment, Kadak hurled himself straight at the oncoming wolverine.

The old miner chuckled gleefully. The carcajou was taken completely by surprise. Probably the wily old battler had tackled many wolves in his time; but here was a wolf which did not fight as other wolves fought. This wolf charged with open jaws, exactly as another wolverine might charge. The carcajou—weighing little more than fifty pounds—was knocked head over heels back against the rocky wall by that headlong attack. In midair he twisted half about, striving to rake his elusive opponent with his claws.

As it so happened, it was this last-minute attack that spelled defeat for the wolverine. He landed on all four feet, facing the wall. Just for an instant his back was turned to the alert dog. Like a flash, Kadak took advantage of the opportunity offered him. He lunged forward and down. His gaping jaws came together at the base of the carcajou's squat head. The wolverine's mighty muscles bunched. He shot into the air, bringing the dog with him. But Kadak's death grip did not loosen. Huber heard the sickening snap when the dog's teeth came together. He shuddered involuntarily.

The instant the wolverine's body was still, Kadak relinquished his hold. Very slowly then he backed away. When he started to go forward, however, he moved in a small circle. As he went he whined, wearily, dolefully, deep in his throat.

Sime Huber's sympathies were aroused. The dog was, without doubt, badly hurt. For the moment the animal was half blinded by blood which had trickled down into its eyes from an ugly gash across its forehead. Both its hind legs dragged painfully. Even as Sime hesitated, the victorious battler slumped upon the fluff of new snow and lay very still.

Sime Huber got busy then. He built a fire and melted some snow in a tin pan. Then, from his little medicine kit, he took a healing salve and several strips of white bandage.

Kadak knew when the man stood over him; but he was too sick to protest. He bared his fangs in a soundless snarl and tried to wriggle away. But the man talked soothingly and put something warm on his sore body that took away the stinging hurt.

For upward of an hour Sime Huber worked over the dog, talking in a low, comforting way as he did so. The dog was not seriously injured, he discovered. The beast had lost much blood, though, and was very weak.

Kadak came to his feet finally and dragged himself toward a near-by thicket. The man's kindly voice called to him. He did not stop, merely turned his head. The man held in his hand a pan, from which came a delectable odor. Kadak's mouth had watered a dozen times during the past few days in response to that same pleasant smell. He stopped, and with nostrils twitching inhaled that tantalizing aroma. The man placed the tin, half filled with warmed-over stew, on the ground. Then he went back to the fire.

If he had been his usual self, alert to suspect danger in every new and unusual circumstance, Kadak would, without doubt, have scurried away; but now he was sick; his danger sense was dulled. Temptation attacked him and he fell.

Out of the corner of his eye Sime Huber watched the rabbit stew disap-

pear—at first in doubtful lappings, then in great, throaty gulps. He laughed.

"That's the stuff, pup," he encouraged. "That'll put new life into you. But you'd better stick around so I can keep salve on them pore ribs o' yourn. If you should happen to run into one of your brothers right now, you wouldn't last a minute. Why don't you stay with old Sime? Come on!"

The old man snapped his fingers enticingly. To his vast surprise, Kadak limpingly approached the fire. Without looking in the man's direction, the dog lay flat upon its stomach, nose toward the fire, and with an almost human sigh closed its eyes.

When it was time to apply more salve, Kadak submitted meekly. When food was again ready, he ate hungrily from a pan between the man's knees. That night he slept beside the fire at Sime Huber's feet.

It was not until next morning that Sime realized how much time he had lost on his humanitarian efforts in behalf of the dog. He hurried around then like one possessed, throwing his duffel together and making ready for a long day's journey. Kadak, head on forepaws, missed no detail of the man's actions. Sometimes he whined lugubriously. Huber feigned not to notice. He did notice, though, and a scowl of uncertainty had settled on his face by the time his duffel was packed and he was ready to go. Finally he lit his pipe, sat on a near-by stump, and smoked thoughtfully. The dog inched over the ground until the tip of its nose brushed the toes of the man's mukluks.

Huber did not speak to the dog, neither did he trust himself to look at the animal. Old Sime knew dogs and loved them. He was afraid now that he would see something in Kadak's eyes, something which might persuade him to do what he knew he should not do.

Huber's problem was, to one of his kindly disposition, a mighty serious one. In order to stand a chance of locating at the new diggings a claim that might be worth anything, it was absolutely necessary to reach Norton ahead of the main body of the stampede. To accomplish this it would be necessary for him to travel twelve to sixteen hours a day. He was neither young nor strong. Already he had lost a day because of the dog. But, if he went on now, he would be obliged to leave his newly found friend. The animal was in no condition to travel. It could scarcely drag one foot after the other. If he left it, some wandering killer would, of course, soon put an end to its misery. But that would be like leaving a sick friend to die in the merciless wilderness.

Sime Huber had never yet gone back on a friend. Deep in his kind old heart he knew that he would be unable to do so now. After all, he told himself, what would one disappointment more or less really matter? His life had been made up of disappointments. This particular case was no more serious than the others, he assured himself. This assurance did not ring true, however. Sime Huber's days of venturing to the far corners of the earth in search of gold were almost over. If he did not make a stake before another winter—he would be through. There would be nothing left but the Old Miners' Home. Sime Huber had never taken charity. He did not intend ever to do so. Therefore, the Old Miners' Home was not for him. There were other ways out—for a failure—that appealed to Sime Huber more strongly than did the prospect of spending his declining years in a charitable institution. Yes, this trip to Norton was vastly important to Sime Huber. If he kept on now, he would be one of the first on the ground. With any luck at all he would be able to locate a paying prospect. He might even strike it rich. If so——

Despite himself, the old man looked

down at the dog. The beast's yellow eyes met the man's eyes; its bushy tail waved slowly. Sime Huber sighed and knocked his cold pipe out on a calloused palm.

"Waal, pup," he muttered, "I guess it can't be did. If I left you—I'd feel like a murderer all the rest of my life. I ain't got much grub. Mebbe we'll both starve to death. But, what of it, eh? Expect there's lots of worse ways of kickin' the bucket."

Kadak growled. Like the tired old man that he really was, Sime Huber slowly got up and unstrapped his pack.

Sime did not realize until several days later just how badly Kadak had been mauled. The animal was pitifully weak; its strength returned slowly.

Under the dog's ever-watchful eye, the old man spent the better part of each day constructing a sturdy hand sled. His tools were inadequate for the task, however, and it was a week before the sled was completed. It was an unwieldy affair, and for some reason unknown to its builder, slewed badly toward the right. But it was not in Sime Huber's nature to be disturbed by minor details. On the morning of the tenth day of his unwilling sojourn in Carcajou Basin—as he had named the strip of bleak wilderness where he had stopped—the old miner, after much persuasion, got the dog onto the sled. Wrapping the animal warmly in blankets, he started, drawing the sled by means of a crudely fashioned harness of babiche thong.

Kadak, being still weak, was uncomfortable and ill at ease for a time; but always, in response to the old man's low-voiced command, he quieted. Twice during that first day Kadak was allowed to walk behind the sled, for an hour or so each time.

By night Sime was exhausted and he had covered little more than a dozen miles during the ten hours he had been on the trail.

In the days that followed, the old miner became more and more firmly convinced that his chance of locating a paying claim at Norton was now practically nil. He came upon many stragglers. Some of these were pushing on toward the diggings, living on starvation rations just as he was; others, gaunt, hollow-eyed men, were already on their way back from that land of false promise. The latter all told the same story—there was no gold to be had at Norton. There were a few rich claims, which had been located by the first arrivals. That was all. The rest was barren wilderness and muskeg swamp land. Old Sime reflected bitterly that he might have been one of those lucky ones. But he was never seriously disturbed for long. One look at the big dog—which now limped only slightly in one foot—at his side, somehow compensated for his disappointment.

Sime Huber did not turn back even in the face of the pessimistic counsel of those who were returning empty-handed from Norton. Most of those discouraged ones were chechahcos. Huber was a sour dough with a lifetime of experience behind him. It was just possible that a likely bit of ground had been overlooked by those impatient ones. He might strike it rich, even yet!

Optimism, in those afflicted with gold madness, is seemingly incurable. There was, perhaps, one chance in a million that Sime Huber would strike a pay streak in the mud flats of Norton, where every foot of ground for miles around had already been painstakingly gone over by men just as experienced as he. Nevertheless, he played that long chance with all the thoughtless optimism of youth.

For some time before Huber's arrival at the new diggings, Norton had come to be known as Starvation Camp. There was absolutely no grub to be had. Only a few of the wealthiest could afford to purchase even the scarcely edible odds and ends that were available in the way

of food. Not alone was Huber's scant store of provisions almost exhausted, but Kadak, now almost fully recovered, ate as much as two ordinary men.

Although the haunts of men were new to him, Kadak, upon arriving at Norton, behaved as though it was all an old story. The dog had started out from Carcajou Basin three weeks before riding on the little hand sled. As he trotted along Norton's main street, it was he who drew the sled. Sime Huber, although practically convinced that there was no gold for him at Norton, experienced a thrill of satisfaction at the excitement of his arrival. It was safe to say that there was not a man there who had ever before seen a dog like Kadak. That night, at his camp on the outskirts of the settlement, he was besieged by a crowd of half-starved but eager men, all anxious to hear about the huge, battle-scarred wolf dog. Sime Huber talked until he was hoarse. Kadak, as became the hero of the occasion, modestly submitted to the friendly maulings of the curious.

Among the interested visitors was "Yank" Corrigan, who, according to report, was one of Norton's few fortunate ones. Corrigan had filed on a valuable claim, for which, rumor said, he had refused to take two hundred thousand dollars. A big man, Corrigan was, with dark, furtive eyes, and a brutish expression in his whiskered face that Huber did not like. Before he left, Corrigan offered Sime the unheard of sum of five hundred dollars for Kadak. Although on the verge of starvation and without a penny to his name, the old miner laughed at the big man.

"Kadak ain't for sale, mister," he announced positively. "An', even if he was, I wouldn't sell him—to you."

Muttering, Yank Corrigan went away.

But Huber had not seen the last of Corrigan. Next morning the big miner was at Sime's camp before the latter was awake. He brought with him an offering of tobacco, and, suspecting that the little man was short of food, a slab of bacon. Corrigan stayed for breakfast. During the course of the meal he again offered to buy Kadak. His final offer was one thousand dollars!

Sime Huber was speechless. One thousand dollars—for a dog! Why, even in the old Klondike days he had never heard of a dog selling for one thousand dollars. It surely was a lot of money. And Kadak did not object to Corrigan's rough attentions, although it was evident that his love was all for Sime Huber.

"I don't want a dog team," Corrigan explained. "A team ain't no good up in this wilderness. A dog like Kadak, though, can drag probably four or five hundred pounds on a hand sled. That's what I want."

Sime Huber hesitated. One thousand dollars meant food, ammunition for his rifle, and a grubstake for one more venture. Then it was that Kadak placed his forepaws on the old miner's knees and licked the man's stubble-covered cheek with his red tongue. Old Sime cursed softly. Then he grinned and threw an arm about the big dog's shaggy neck.

"I'm sorry, mister," he said; "but it just can't be did, that's all. I wouldn't sell this dog for a million dollars."

Yank Corrigan jumped to his feet and caught up the remainder of the slab of bacon. "Danged old fool!" he muttered and stamped angrily away.

Huber spent the rest of that day looking over the diggings. By night he was thoroughly convinced that, except for Yank Corrigan's claim and a couple of others, there was not a single paying prospect in the place. Although tired and mighty discouraged, Sime Huber went supperless that night. Faced with a two-hundred-and-fifty-mile journey through the wilderness, his entire store of food consisted of perhaps a pound

of flour, a single can of tomatoes, and a baking powder can half filled with coffee.

"We'll be startin' first thing in the mornin', pup," the old man announced. "We'll have a bite to eat before we go."

Kadak waved his bushy tail and whined, as though in complete understanding of the situation.

Habit, regardless of its vagaries, is an important part of every life. For several weeks Sime Huber had been awakened each morning by Kadak's cold nose nudging his face. This morning, however, Kadak did not disturb him. The sun was high when old Sime finally awoke. He had overslept. Almost instantly, he realized that Kadak was gone!

For some reason Huber was immediately convinced that Kadak was gone for good. He could not have told why he felt this way. Fundamentally, he was not pessimistic. Kadak was gone, however. Sime followed the dog's tracks through the new snow to the near-by thicket edge. There, a man had stood. The man had fed the dog red meat of some kind. Then the man and the dog had gone away.

Sime Huber's subsequent actions gave clear indication of the hurt in his heart. Discouragement he was used to. Disappointment was a familiar thing. But to be tricked and cheated by one's best friend was an entirely different matter! Kadak had deserted him! The old man crouched long over his little fire. He ate sparingly. The food, somehow, did not taste good this morning, this despite the fact that he was very hungry.

It was nearly midday when the old miner dejectedly started on the trail to the south. He had left the hand sled behind him. With Kadak gone, there was no need for it.

He did not go far that first day. Long before night he was tired to exhaustion. It was the same the next day. At mid-afternoon of this second day, he made camp and huddled despondently over a tiny fire. His supplies were dwindling. But he did not rant and rave. He would never reach Carder's Notch. What of it? Far better that he should perish in that vast white wilderness which had been his home for forty years than to spend the rest of his days in senile idleness in the Old Miners' Home. Nothing really mattered much now. Kadak had deserted him.

It was midday of the third day. Sime, a tiny black speck on the white vastness, moved slowly toward the south, mumbling senselessly as he went. At times he laughed in shrill hysteria. Already, the snow madness was taking hold of him. Suddenly, the report of a rifle sounded. Sime Huber turned bloodshot eyes. At first he saw nothing. There were more shots; and then he saw an erratically moving object come over the snowy plain toward him. Long before he had identified this strange object, he saw the man, a big man, who carried a rifle, and was following that object.

Sime's vision cleared and he saw that the man was following a dog who was dragging a sled. The sled was on its side and followed swiftly the tip of a funnel-shaped cloud of snow dust at the dog's heels. The man with the rifle fired. The dog twitched sidewise and fell. Almost immediately, however, it struggled to its feet and hurried on.

And then Sime Huber discovered that the dog was following his trail! Its nose to the ground, the big dog held close to his tracks. The man with the rifle fired again. Suddenly Sime Huber realized that the fleeing dog was Kadak, and the man with the rifle was Yank Corrigan.

Abruptly, a killing rage possessed Sime Huber. Never before had he desired to kill a man. Now, however, he longed to kill Yank Corrigan. In a single comprehensive glance, old Sime understood everything. Corrigan had

enticed Kadak away by the offer of food. The dog had trusted the man. Corrigan had probably slipped a noose about the animal's neck and led him away. Kadak had, in some mysterious manner, ferreted out his beloved master's trail. He had got away from Corrigan——

Just as Yank Corrigan brought his rifle to his shoulder again, Huber went into action. There were but five shells in his old Winchester, he knew. But one was all that was necessary. The old rifle spat fire and roared a split second before Yank Corrigan fired. The big man, with a bullet through his body just beneath the right shoulder blade, twisted sidewise and sprawled headlong upon the ground.

Two minutes later, Sime Huber was on his knees in the snow. His arms were about Kadak's neck and he was murmuring foolishly.

He was still kneeling there when a hoarse shout that sounded very much like a command caused him to look up. The rifle jerked to his shoulder and he would have fired had he not recognized the fur-clad figure before him. Corporal Jim Riley of the Canadian Police!

The big policeman held his service pistol tightly gripped in a mittened hand.

"Sime Huber!" he marveled. "Why, you danged old cockydoodle, what——"

"He, Corrigan, stole my dog," the old man interrupted; "stole him, he did —an' then tried to kill him. He turned his rifle on Kadak, Jim. The ornery coyote! I didn't aim to kill him; but if he's dead, I'm willin' to pay the penalty. If you're takin' me in, Jim, I won't argue with you." Sime dropped his rifle on the ground.

Corporal Jim Riley's dark eyes were suspiciously moist.

"I ain't takin' you, Sime," he said slowly. "In the first place, Corrigan—as he's been callin' himself recently—ain't dead. In the second place, he's an escaped convict, with a price on his head."

Sime Huber stared blankly down at Yank Corrigan's prostrate body. "A—a convict!" he repeated.

Jim Riley nodded. "An' a danged bad egg," he added. "I've been trailin' him for six months, ever since his escape from Santa Maria Prison. An' he sure has led me a merry chase! Follered him to Norton, but he had been warned, an' got away before I turned up. I was trailin' him an' would've got him. You beat me to it, though, Sime. He's worth exactly two thousand dollars to you, ol'-timer."

Sime Huber swallowed hard. Two thousand dollars!

"But I need that two thousand dollars," Riley went on; "an' I aim to have it."

Although it was scarcely noticeable, Corporal Jim Riley's dark eyes were twinkling.

"Expect you oughta be satisfied with, say, a hundred thousand," he went on quickly. And then, as Sime Huber merely stared: "Well, speak up, you ol' rooster!" he growled.

Sime Huber shook his head. "I—I —don't understand, Jim," he said.

Corporal Riley laughed, and threw an arm about the old miner's shoulders.

"Corrigan owns one of the richest claims at Norton," he explained; "some say it's worth quarter of a million. Some say less. Call it a hundred thousand. Now he's a murderer, with a life sentence waitin' for him. He's goin' back to prison to finish servin' that sentence. A convicted felon can't own property in this country, Sime. Hence, that claim o' his at Norton's is right now open to relocation. I will see to it that nobody else knows about Corrigan until you've had a chance to file the necessary papers. An' I'm claimin' the reward money. Any objections?"

Sime Huber shook his head. "Not none," he said. His wrinkled face was

bright with a vast relief. "Y' know, Jim," he said slowly, "I was jest a-thinkin'—they wouldn't've let me in the Old Miners' Home with Kadak, anyhow; an', by grabs, I wouldn't've gone there without him! An' so this here's purty lucky for both of us, pup, ain't it the truth?"

And Kadak, who had been closely watching his master's face, whined and reached for the old man's hand with his tongue.

Coming Next Week—"BUNKO," by JOHN BRIGGS.

AN INDIAN CHILD-NAMING CEREMONY

FIFTY-SIX years ago, when the Osage Indians came to Oklahoma, there were four thousand of them; but to-day, it is said, there are less than three hundred full-blooded members of this famous tribe left. This is believed to be due largely to mingling with the white man and to change in customs. However, the full-blooded Indians of this tribe who are left still observe ancient customs, and recently a most interesting symbolic child-naming ceremony took place in an Osage Indian settlement, near Gray Horse, Oklahoma.

Without shedding a tear, a full-blooded Indian baby went through the prescribed ceremony. To begin with, its hair was shaved except for a fringe around the lower edges, implying a petition to the Great Spirit that it should live to a good old age without any kind of obstruction. The baby was naked when the ceremony began, but when it ended it was covered with stripes of red paint from the sacred paint-pot.

The ceremonies began at sunrise the day before the child was finally christened, with the Taking of Life Symbols before a large group of full-blooded Indians at the home of the child's parents. The medicine chief chanted the symbols while he decorated himself with colored paint from a sacred paint-pot, fastened to his scalp lock a red feather, and then wrapped himself in a bright-hued blanket.

At the east end of their great frame home, the child's parents were seated, while the chief medicine man and his dozen or more helpers sat on the south side, and visiting clansmen viewed the spectacle from the north side. In the center of the room was a hollow square. When all were seated, symbolic articles, consisting of branches, a bowl of mashed corn, and a bowl of water to be used in the ceremony, were passed around. The medicine men then began their chant, which lasted for an hour, while the baby was passed to the head medicine chief, who in turn passed him to the six lesser chiefs, and then back to their leader, who dipped the tips of the child's fingers into a bowl of water in which sacred paint and red cedar branches had been placed. The head chief then touched the head, lips, arms, and body of the little one, an act which was an appeal that the child, in going through life, would never lack good food. After that, the mother came forward and two small willow sticks were placed in her hands, each of which represented a sacred name. She was requested to choose one of the names, and she chose Wa-Shta-Ge-Was, which was the most euphonious and had the most religious meaning. Thus the child became a real Indian personage who some day may become a great chieftain.

Did He Die?

By H. C. Wire

Author of "Happy Handicap," etc.

Is Joaquin Murieta still alive? Was this terror of California gold camps, this Mexican Robin Hood, not shot down at all there in the foothills of the Coast Range? Whose head was it, then, preserved and exhibited in San Francisco at one dollar a look? Men paid money to see this bullet-scarred thing, and went out believing they had gazed upon Joaquin Murieta.

But had they? There is one who says not. And who should know the fate of a man better than the woman who loved him?

There is no mystery about the beginning of Joaquin's reign. But the doubt, and the intrigue, and all the maneuverings of a girl's wit with his, enter soon after, and continue down to the uncertain end.

Swiftly in the first dusk of a May evening a boy came loping over the Sonora hills, driving a bunch of cattle to their home corral for the night. At the head of a long, straight canyon, he drew to a sharp halt and let the animals go on unattended. They knew the route, and this boy had business elsewhere.

He wheeled up the canyon bank and dropped toward the next. His name was Joaquin Murieta, a dark, genial-faced fellow, of mixed Spanish and Indian blood, slight of build, with the easy, graceful manner of a born cavalier. He was eighteen, well-educated for his class, and with a head full of plans for the future.

At this moment only one of those plans was important. All his thoughts, for a few months now, had centered around his desperate love for a pretty,

red-cheeked girl of seventeen who lived on the ranch next his father's. That she loved him in return, he knew well. But her skin was fair; she was pure Castilian; and it was her proud parent's command that she should never be seen with that Mexican, Joaquin Murieta.

Luckily, though, her father owned a mule pack train, and his business often carried him far from home. He left his daughter, Clarita, with her younger brother, Reyes, and a warning each time about Joaquin. As if romantic Murieta could not make friends with the other boy!

Riding down a coulee which emptied into a wider valley beyond, Joaquin thought of that and smiled. Long ago he had made it up with the brother.

Presently, Joaquin's smile died. It was all right to see Clarita this way. But he was growing restless. He wanted to strike out in life for himself, and for her, too. There was a letter in his pocket even now from his brother who had gone to the gold fields of California. The brother wanted Joaquin to come up there. The move promised much. To-night Joaquin would talk to Clarita of that very thing.

Dark had almost veiled the canyon when he halted at a fringe of willows near a water tank, peered around, saw that the mule corrals were empty. Good! The father was still away. Going afoot toward a low, wide-winged house, he gave the meadow lark's whistle. At once a door opened. Clarita, a black shawl on her head, came running out to him. He met her with outstretched arms, and together they walked to their particular hill slope above the house.

For a long time they talked. Joaquin read his brother's letter. He turned to the girl, her hand in his.

"Clarita, that is the place for us," he said. "California is good. We will be rich. We will live happily there all our lives. Will you go with me?"

Carita's fair head bowed and she sat many minutes without answering. Then she looked up.

"But my father, Joaquin, he will never let us——"

The boy's usually quiet temper flared. He sprang to his feet. "Your father! Must we ask? Do we not love each other? Is life not our own to——"

His sentence was never finished. In the dark of full night, neither had seen a string of tired, slow-moving mules come into the ranch corral. In the stress of their feeling, the young couple did not realize that their voices carried; nor did they see a black hulk come creeping along the hill beside them.

A fist struck Joaquin's words into his mouth. He staggered. Another blow dropped him. When he rose again, Clarita was vanishing downward in her father's iron grip.

Joaquin's horse was below, yet he dared not go to it now. With rage in his blood, and a fear for Clarita in his heart, he tramped home, refused to eat, flung himself upon his bed. He did not sleep. He watched the stars come out and the moon swing up. His window was close to the ground, and it seemed to him that a ghost walked to it, when some time past midnight, Clarita herself stood there.

With a gasp he sprang to her. "Clarita! Clarita, mine! What——"

She silenced him, pointing. His horse was in the shadows. On the saddle was a bundle, her possessions, for she had come to go North with him to California. She spoke breathlessly. They must go at once. Many miles must be put behind them by morning. Yes, she loved him. Loved him better than all life. But they must fly!

The first fever of the gold rush was spent when Joaquin Murieta and his young Clarita arrived in the placer diggings of Stanislaus Creek. This was in 1850. Still, there was enough of the

precious metal to be found, if a man worked hard for it. Joaquin did. Very soon he had built himself a cabin, furnished it, planted a garden for Clarita, and called the place home. The spot he had chosen was isolated from the part of Stanislaus Creek worked by Americans, for already Joaquin had learned that "greasers" were unwelcome. Here, though, where no one else was seeking gold, it seemed he might live peacefully.

For a month his dream was true. California was good. He was slowly filling a buckskin bag with dust. Clarita loved him more than ever.

Then in the dark of night, five men rode bunched toward the little cabin. Inside, Joaquin heard them. Something in the clatter of so many horses' hoofs warned him.

"Quick!" he said to Clarita. "Run out and hide. The Americans are coming!"

"Leave you?" she answered. "I'll not!"

He took her wrists, trying to make her go. She held back. Next moment the door burst open and five men crowded in.

They were a type common enough in the backwash of forty-niners. Having had no luck themselves or being too lazy to dig out the gold, they worked off their resentment by making life hard for any one who had been more fortunate. Their particular prey were the Mexican, the Chinaman, and all other "foreigners."

To this same group Joaquin was already paying a fee for the privilege of prospecting Stanislaus Creek. He knew the fee was simply holdup money; they had no right to it; but he paid to avoid trouble. Lately they had demanded more and more. He could not meet their price.

In the little room one stepped out ahead of the rest. He was squat, broad, with sandy hair hanging to his shoulders, and a red snarling face. An army revolver hung in his belt. Those behind him carried rifles.

"Well, greaser?" he snapped. "How about it?"

"Señor," said Joaquin, "I told you I cannot pay."

"Pay, or get out!" the man retorted. He looked around the room. "Where's your dust?"

It flashed to Joaquin's mind that they meant to rob him—take all he and Clarita had saved. He saw the man's hand go to his gun butt. Joaquin's single weapon was a bowie knife. It lay now on the table where he had thrown his things for the night. His fingers darted toward it. Instantly a fist struck him back against the wall.

He sprang up, and the hot anger, so long held under control, flared in rage. Rashly he would have leaped upon the five there in the doorway, if Clarita had not foreseen his act and flung herself in front of him.

"Joaquin!" she cried. "Joaquin, they'll surely kill you! Don't! Let them have——"

Suddenly she, too, was silenced with a blow that stunned her. She was flung from Joaquin. Like a pack of crazed dogs the men surged around him, slashing with their fists, kicking with their heavy boots, mauling him until he lay torn and bleeding. He could no longer stagger up.

The leader stood over him. "You be out of here by dawn, greaser, or we'll make you hard to find!" he warned.

Many miles south of Stanislaus Creek is the valley of the Calaveras. There were no placer diggings in that part, no prospectors, only a strip of green bottom country with wooded hills fringing either side. It was a good place to start a ranch, and here in the spring of '51 there appeared on the Calaveras the first rancher. He built a temporary wikiup, made a corral for his two

horses, and began grubbing brush from the land.

Joaquin Murieta felt secure again. Ranching was not like mining. There were millions of acres in California; enough for everybody. He hated to give up the lure of gold, but he and Clarita had talked it all out. This was the best spot for their home.

Joaquin had made only a start on his job of brush-grubbing, when one afternoon a lank individual with a mouth full of tobacco and a Missouri drawl, rode down the Calaveras, turned toward young Murieta's side of it, and stopped.

He threw one leg over his saddle horn and rolled the tobacco, while slowly his eyes traveled about the section of land with its corral, its wikiup, and stream of water. Deliberately he ignored Joaquin, until at last his eyes dropped upon him.

"Good location, Mex," he said then. "It strikes me right well. I aim to squat here."

"Farther on, maybe," Joaquin answered. "This is mine now."

"The heck ye say! There ain't no foreigners takin' up land in these parts!"

"I have my citizen papers," declared Joaquin. And he had. He was no longer an alien. "My claim here is good."

Casually the man uncrooked his leg. From under his knee projected the barrel of a rifle. The movement was apparently without purpose, but Joaquin saw, and understood. In a moment the stranger rode off, saying:

"I've got three partners, Mex. We'll be movin' in to-morrow."

So the war against "foreigners" in California had come even to the Calaveras!

That night two gunshots brought Joaquin springing from his sleep. Clarita was at his side, filled with terror at the remembrance of one other night.

Quickly picking up his revolver, Joaquin led her out into the dark. There they waited, yet nothing followed those first shots. At dawn, though, he saw his two animals lying dead in the corral, and reaching them, he found a sheet of paper on one. On it was written:

Greasers follow their horses. You move on.

Grimly, Joaquin stalked back to his wikiup and told Clarita they were going. The lines of his face were beginning to set in a cold, steady look. A genial boy had ridden North to seek his fortune. A man of another sort was forming in Joaquin now.

There was still left to him one way to earn a good living. While bad men used every chance to show their hatred for Mexicans, they seemed to forget that hate when it came to gambling. The best monte dealers were deft-fingered brown men. And, for some strange reason, miners bringing their dust down from the hills liked to play at tables presided over by them. Perhaps it was because white knew white too well.

Joaquin loved the cards, and his slender hands could do a neat job of shuffling and dealing. Also, he had the light banter, along with a flashing smile, that takes the edge off when a man loses, and makes him feel a fine fellow when he wins. So back again in the placer camps, Joaquin soon found a place for his talents in a gambling hall at Murphy's Diggings.

He established Clarita in a house near by. Life again went on calmly. Joaquin proved a good monte dealer. In fact, he was too good. His table made money for the house, and the man he worked for raised his salary. With that extra pay, he bought fine clothes to dress Clarita in. Men began to see how pretty she was. Then, because of her fair skin, they said she was too good to be the wife of that greaser.

So trouble was already brewing for Joaquin on the Sunday afternoon when he walked two miles out of Murphy's Diggings to visit his brother. It was late by the time he was ready to return. He must hurry back to start his game at eight. His brother offered him a white horse, saying, "I'll come in for him to-morrow."

Later that evening, having tied the horse near his house and come to work as usual, Joaquin was suddenly aware of the tramp of feet in the gambling hall. Fifteen men strode toward him, vigilantes of Murphy's Diggings. But he knew they were not the same sort of vigilance committee that had cleaned up San Francisco. Those men acted for law. This band here had organized for the sole purpose of running the camp to their own advantage. No fair-minded citizens were among them. They were killers, and gold thieves, and the drifting toughs of the country.

As the fifteen advanced, all the players stepped back from Joaquin's monte table. He sat fixed, staring at the mob.

Abruptly a revolver was thrust in his face.

"Get up, you danged horse thief!" snapped the man holding it.

Joaquin remained seated. "Horse thief?" he questioned.

"Yeah, sure you don't know nothin' about it!" scoffed the leader. He drew back the hammer of his gun. "Get up or stay there, suit yourself, Mex."

Joaquin rose to his feet. "Gentlemen," he asked evenly, "what horse do you mean?"

"That white one tied at your house," came the answer. "You stole him."

"He belongs to my brother," Joaquin answered.

"Then your brother stole him!" The man wheeled. "Grab this fellow, boys! And we'll hang his brother, too!"

It was useless for Joaquin to slip his hand inside the table drawer where his gun lay. Fifteen men were too many. And at this moment he doubted that they would hang him. He had not stolen the horse. He was certain his brother had not stolen it.

But his judgment was wrong. The Murphy's Diggings vigilantes were out to hang a Mexican this night. They dragged Joaquin from the gambling hall, threw him on a horse, and bound him there.

"Make for his brother's!" the leader ordered.

Mounted, the mob swept out of town and along the road Joaquin had recently traveled. He remained silent during the two-mile ride. Yet upon nearing the house, he shouted in sudden warning, "Run, Hermano! Run!"

He saw his brother leap into the doorway. But it was too late. The fifteen vigilantes raced ahead, their guns trained upon him. Four dismounted, bound his arms, threw him, too, astride the horse that carried Joaquin.

"They say you stole the white," said Joaquin quickly. "They'll hang us!"

Hermano shook his head. He was older than Joaquin, very dark, and perhaps not as likable. Yet this was his first trouble with the Americans, for he had been content to live out of town and not intrude himself among them.

"No," he answered. "We'll have a trial. They can prove nothing."

Rapidly the band returned toward camp, to halt near its edge under a wide-limbed tree. Joaquin and Hermano were dragged from the horse and separated. Joaquin saw his brother led beneath a noosed rope.

"Vigilantes!" he cried. "Give us a trial! Give us a chance!"

The two men holding him jerked back his head and walked him away from the tree. Near it a bonfire had been lighted, and now in the red flare Joaquin saw his brother struggling with his captors. Next moment the noose was slipped around his neck, the rope hoisted, and he was pulled up where all could watch.

"One less dirty greaser!" yelled the crowd. "Bring on another!"

When Joaquin was led to the tree, the vigilante leader turned to the mob and said:

"This here court is goin' to show itself fair. The horse thief has paid. We don't need any more hangin's. But this Mex ought to be showed a lesson, too, so I pass judgment on him—twenty lashes, naked."

They stripped Joaquin to the skin and bound him spread-eagled to the tree trunk. With a bull whip then they lashed him twenty times. That was their mistake. They should have killed him, to save their own hides afterward. For upon the face of Joaquin Murieta, according to an eyewitness, there came a look that passed from human into fiend.

He stood in the red light, jaws clamped, hands clenched above his head, and took without a sound the whip strokes that opened bleeding cuts upon his body. Only his eyes showed the remorseless hate being born within him. The last vestige of the boy who had come North from Sonora was gone. There was left a crafty, cold-blooded man whose only thought was vengeance upon every living white.

When the vigilantes left him senseless, still tied to the tree, it was Clarita who cut him down. For a week in their house she nursed back his strength and hastened the wounds' healing. She wanted him to be well again soon. For it was in her mind to leave California forever.

As soon as Joaquin could listen she told him that. "Sonora is our home," she said. "Let us go there. My father will forgive us now. In this place is only torture and death. Let us go."

Joaquin shook his head. His brain was seething with a picture of each hated man who had killed his brother and lashed himself at a tree. There were fifteen men in all.

In a week Joaquin returned to his monte table. At times he caught jeering glances. He was a dog who had been whipped. But he let those glances pass, dealt the cards expertly, and even flashed his smile across the game.

One morning a man was found dead on the road beyond Murphy's Diggings. Sudden death in the placer camps was not unusual. So this event caused only a little talk.

In quick succession, a few hours apart, two more men met the same fate. One dropped in broad daylight in the main street of town. Three in a row. Friends of the three began to feel uneasy, for these three all happened to have been among the fifteen vigilantes.

That night a player at Joaquin's table, perhaps a little too drunk, muttered thickly, "I think you done these killin's."

Joaquin smiled. "My friend," he said carelessly, "you think too much. Go home and sleep."

Quite late the man went home. He took Joaquin's advice and slept—never to wake again. Friends found him next day with a knife wound in his heart. He also had been a vigilante.

Immediately the eleven left of the fifteen decided to take action. Here was proof enough for them. They sprang upon horses and rode to the Mexican's house beyond the gambling hall, surrounded it, called for the greaser and Clarita to come out. There was no answer. Stealthily, four of the men entered. The house was empty.

A new dealer took Joaquin's place at the monte game, and nothing was seen of young Murieta. Yet in the two months following, scarcely a week passed but that one of the hangmen gave up his life. At last there were only five remaining. Something had to be done about it. These with their friends gathered at a rear table in the hall to lay a plan. The place was crowded. Men watching the games sat on benches along the room's sides.

But what sort of plan could be made? No one had seen the greaser. He was moving through the country just like a ghost.

"He ain't no ghost, though," said one, a burly, bearded tough who was known to boast much to keep up his courage. "And I'd sure like to meet him! Just once!"

There was a sudden movement among the men on the benches. A figure leaped to a vacant table facing the one where the vigilantes sat. He flung the black serape from his face.

"Your wish, señor! Here's Joaquin!"

A gun blazed in the figure's hand. The man dropped dead. Whirling, Joaquin sprang through a side door, while behind him a dozen revolvers spurted. His life seemed charmed—a thing that was to be proved repeatedly later—for not a bullet touched him.

So the career of Joaquin Murieta began in what he considered rightful vengeance. But a man's life at such a game soon is not his own. He can never say, "This job is done; I'm through." He is hounded by crimes already committed, and driven to do more.

Joaquin was a hunted outlaw now and could not turn back. Needing horses and money, he took both. To cover those robberies, he needed friends, though there was no man on earth he trusted. Yet tales of his cold courage were already abroad, and the friends he gathered were willing to acknowledge his leadership.

His band grew swiftly. First came Manuel Garcia, called "Three Finger" Jack, a tall, dark-skinned, cruel-faced Spaniard, twice Joaquin's age and with twice the boy's experience. Joaquin made him his lieutenant.

One named Valesquez came next; also a Spaniard, who was a highwayman even before the days of California's gold rush. Others joined, one of the last being Reyes Feliz, the brother of Clarita. Toward the end of 1852 Joaquin Murieta had a company of one hundred followers. Vengeance was no longer his motive. Quick money gets into a man's blood. When Joaquin thought of his first days here in the new country, he laughed. Why should he go back to mining? Or ranching? Or even the well-paid job of monte dealer?

By January, '53, Murieta was thoroughly in control of the State. No money was safe upon the roads. As if by witchcraft, he or his men knew whenever a shipment of gold was moving. If a man had a fine horse, he was certain to be stopped, ordered off, sent on afoot. Storekeepers dealing in food and supplies learned that when a stranger entered and said, "Fill a gunny sack with the best you've got—for Joaquin," they were better off not to hesitate.

Stories went around that he could not be killed, even if a gun were fired at him point-blank. Another credited him with being in several places, too far distant for mortal man to travel, on the same day. This was almost true, for it is on record that he rode from San Francisco to a town south of Los Angeles—six hundred miles—in thirty-six hours.

The fact behind his growth of fame was that Joaquin depended on almost foolhardy daring. Nailed to the express-office door in Sacramento was the notice:

> We will pay five thousand dollars for Joaquin Murieta.

One morning a group of men standing not far from the poster saw a Spanish grandee in all his trappings of silver-inlaid saddle, silver bit, and a red-and-gold costume for himself, halt to read the sign. Presently he leaned forward and scribbled upon it, then casually trotted away.

The group strolled over to see what was written there. They saw:

I will pay ten thousand dollars!

JOAQUIN.

From down the road came loud laughter and they scattered with the *spat* of a revolver bullet above their heads.

As for Joaquin himself, he knew his power was growing unwieldy. He ruled his men as grimly as he ruled the highways; but with their own success, their rebellion grew. Three Finger Jack was showing bad signs. Under cover, Joaquin knew, almost half the band was listening to words from this lieutenant.

And there was Clarita. Through these months she had remained with him, dressed in man's clothes, riding at his side in more than one desperate race. But she was troubled. Her brother, Reyes, had taken a wife. Within a week he had been captured and hanged. Now the two girls were together, and seeing the plight of that other one, Clarita knew she must face the same thing some day. Joaquin would be killed.

Joaquin would not listen to argument. Tears were a different matter. One day when he returned to his head camp in a cave of the Coast Hills, he found Clarita crying. His heart was not wholly steel. Times are known when he gave back money taken from old people, and no man who ever helped him was harmed. Now he sat beside Clarita and put his arm about her.

"You're homesick? You want me to go?"

She nodded.

Joaquin remained silent. Then he stood up.

"Well, I will. But first we must find Three Finger Jack. He's in Los Angeles and has money that belongs to all the men."

They started South at once. His followers were to wait there in the Coast Hills cave. Clarita, as usual, looked like a man of considerable estate. Both she and Joaquin wore the costume of gentlemen, bright-colored cloth heavily embroidered with silver. They might have ridden straight down El Camino Real and been honored guests at every Spanish house on the way to Los Angeles.

Yet, Joaquin was wary and traveled mostly by dark. The State itself was hunting him now. Two companies of rangers had been organized, one north and one south, and were making it their sole business to track him down.

He reached Los Angeles on the first of May, learned that Three Finger Jack was in a house on the plaza, and riding there, entered alone. Clarita remained outside holding the horses. She was also on watch, and in a moment saw an American staring from the entrance of a near-by store. Another joined him. They pointed, talked, disappeared.

Immediately, Clarita rode close to the steps of the house Joaquin had entered and gave the whistle of a meadow lark. The door flew open. Joaquin emerged with one hand gripping Three Finger's arm. They were in heated talk, and at the top of the steps Joaquin halted and swung to his lieutenant.

From across the plaza a rifle cracked. Crying out, Clarita steadied Joaquin's horse, while both he and Three Finger Jack sprang upon it. They had the advantage of being mounted. And again it seemed that every time a man drew bead on Joaquin Murieta, something spoiled his aim. The three vanished untouched.

Outside Los Angeles, Three Finger Jack picked up a fresh horse and five of the band who had been waiting for him. They had news that was bad for Joaquin. The company of State rangers from the south were approaching and combing every road. The one from the north, Joaquin already knew, was working south. He was between the

two. Only one way out—to warn his men in the Coast Hills cave and take them east toward the desert.

With that in mind, Joaquin, Clarita, Three Finger Jack, and the five others rode night by night up from Los Angeles and were safely as far as the Tulare Plains. Here, before coming out of canyon country to cross miles of open land, Joaquin stopped and made camp. Beyond the Tulare Plains lay the hills that rose dark and protecting. Yet he wanted to make certain before going on.

As usual, he and his men had one camp, while Clarita, not far off, was by herself in another. The night passed. At dawn, with a lookout posted, the men scattered under a wide oak tree where they had slept, Joaquin filled a bucket with water and started to wash down his sleek bay horse.

Suddenly, he jerked his head up. Ten men were riding toward camp from among the oaks. Then he saw that his lookout on the canyon rim had started a small fire to cook something. His hands clenched. Fool! That fellow would answer for this!

Joaquin thought they would get out, for he saw he was not recognized.

The men approached. "Howdy?" said a slender, youngish one in the lead. "Travelin'?"

"Yes, señor," Joaquin answered, always civil. "We're on our way to Los Angeles."

"Seen any Mexican mustang hunters?" the man asked.

Joaquin shrugged. "No, señor."

"Thought maybe you had," came the answer. "I'm out collecting State fees from them."

Joaquin doubted it. The State did collect money from men who hunted wild horses, but these fellows had a watchful look. Casually he wiped the water from his bay's back, seeing as he did so that Three Finger and one or two of his men were managing to edge together. Under his breath he cursed himself. His gun hung on a limb of the oak, out of reach.

The new arrivals were hesitating, and seemed uncertain, when from behind them an eleventh man rode in. He gave one look. His mouth opened, "For Heaven's sake, captain!" he cried.

Instantly, Joaquin recognized this lieutenant of State rangers, and knew that he too was known. Through the second that it took the rangers to become aware of the truth and drop hands to their guns, Joaquin shouted:

"Scatter! Every man for himself!"

In doing that, he unknowingly diverted the first gunfire from his direction. The rangers shot at Three Finger Jack and those running away. Joaquin, with his hand twisted in the bay's mane, swung on and plunged downhill.

He was well out of shooting distance before a bullet followed him. His bay could fly like the wind from any horse there. But suddenly the animal was seen to reach a coulee bank, leap, turn end over end in air. Joaquin's dark form shot off. Then both vanished.

The bay was dead when the rangers reached it later. Yet now, in a moment, Joaquin was again mounted and racing away from the coulee! He planned many things with foresight. He always kept Clarita camped by herself.

Three Finger Jack and those afoot with him were run down and shot. And it is true that a month afterward a mutilated head, preserved in alcohol, was exhibited in John King's saloon in San Francisco. The charge for a look at it was one dollar. The label said, "Joaquin Murieta." But was it?

There live to-day an old couple, both close to one hundred, off down in the hills of Sonora. She does the talking. He sits and nods. And if after hearing the story of Joaquin from her, you insist, "But, señora, they say Joaquin Murieta is dead!" she will smile.

"Yes, señor," is her answer, "so they say."

The Humanness of the Indian

(Gratitude)

By Kathleen Ludwick

MY father came to the Pacific coast as a young man. His mother was a Quakeress. His natural inclinations were humane and peaceable. Even in those stirring times he rarely carried firearms. Once on a desert in Nevada he came across old Chief Winnemucca, in sore straits. I cannot remember whether he had sprained his ankle or broken his leg. At any rate, his horse had got away and he was afoot on the desert, disabled, and without water. Needless to say, my father rescued him.

Some time afterward—several years, I believe—my father was going on a journey. He was alone and on horseback. He met a party of Piute Indians in war paint and feathers. The leader was a son of Chief Winnemucca. They stopped for a pow-wow. Then they separated and rode on. My father was unarmed. He said he expected every moment to get a bullet in the back, but he was not harmed. The war party rode on to a station and killed both the men there. They cut their bodies into sections, ripped open a feather bed, and put the pieces inside the tick. They had spared my father from gratitude, because of the service he had rendered the old chief. I have heard my father and old Winnemucca talk about this more than once.

"Well, Winnemuc, I thought I was a goner that time!" my father would say, and both the old men would laugh.

"No, no! Injun no hurtem friend!" the old chief would say.

He made the rounds of the tribes once a year, and always stopped a day or so at the *campoodie* on the hill behind our house, where "Captain Jim," the subchief, lived, who had married Minnie, a niece of Winnemucca's. He always ate at the table with us on these visits, sitting at the head of the table in his thick,

greasy blanket—no dirtier and greasier than our own would probably have been under the same conditions! He must have been eighty years old when I saw him last. At least, he was a very old man and his hands shook from palsy. If any of us five children were missing, he would inquire solicitously about the absent one. He never forgot our names. When he left he would always place his wrinkled old hand solemnly on each of our childish heads. I assume he was giving us his blessing. He was a man of huge stature and of dignified and impressive appearance.

My maternal grandfather's family traveled from St. Louis to Rogue River Valley in an emigrant train in 1852. My grandfather built a log cabin, set out an orchard that had been brought in a sailing vessel around "the Horn," and cut several hundred tons of hay. A little Indian boy named Billy worked for them. The Indians broke out, burned my grandfather's cabin and the hay, destroyed his provisions, and hacked down his orchard. The family would have been annihilated, like some of their neighbors, had it not been for the little Indian boy, Billy, who warned them of the approach of a war party. They had barely time to escape with their lives, taking only a carpet-bag or two with them filled with clothing my grandmother had caught up hurriedly while the men harnessed the horses and hitched them to the wagon. My aunt was born three days later in a log cabin in Jacksonville.

Billy was afterward found, face downward, shot through the heart, killed by his people as a traitor, *for warning the white people who had been kind to him.* Far be it from me to decry the virtue of patriotism, yet, naturally, in our family, we revere the memory of little Billy, the traitor. So much depends on one's viewpoint!

THE PERSEVERING LICHEN

THE lichen is of such universal growth, and capable of surviving under such adverse conditions, that it might well be adopted as the emblem of the persevering. Its example would inspire even the faintest of heart.

The encyclopædia says that the lichen, in botany, is a plant or vegetable growth of the group *Lichenes*, ordinarily recognizable by its dry aspect and gray, brown greenish, or blackish color, and its appearance in crusts, scaly patches, or bushlike forms on trees, rails, rocks, et cetera. Every one will immediately recognize the description. They are found in all lands, endure the greatest extremes of temperature, live where nothing else can, and corrode the hardest rocks, thus contributing to the formation of the soil. Mention of them is found in remote history, and they are of innumerable species. One variety has been found in ancient Egyptian coffins, in which it was used as filling.

But what will, perhaps, be most interesting to any readers who were not already aware of it, is that the Golden Gate of San Francisco is a lichen product. This fact has been pointed out recently by Doctor R. S. Williams, of the New York Botanical Gardens. It is, this specialist says, from the color of the lichens covering the surface of the rocks that the harbor's mouth is named.

Lichens will be most familiar to many, perhaps, under the title of "Iceland moss" used as a palliative for dyspepsia and colds, though the encyclopædia relentlessly points out that "for the most part the medicinal virtues of lichens are imaginary."

The Round-Up

PLEASIN' folks with stories, fact and fiction, has been our business for over thirty years. Fact is, it's the only "business" we know, or ever did know. And we sure love it. O' course, it's the same in the story-tellin' business as in all other businesses; same as in our personal relations with folks, in our efforts to please them. Some is jest tickled pink with a thing, while that same thing, when presented to others, jest naturally bores them to death.

For example, take what "The Critic," of Osceola, Florida, says about Case:

"Boss and Folks: Please let me have my little say before you put any crown on Robert Ormond Case. He may be a good author, but most of his stories are too much about nothing.

"If praise must be given, just try to find any better author than Max Brand or George Owen Baxter. George Owen Baxter is my favorite author. His story, 'Two Broncos,' was fine. He always has interesting heroes. Max Brand was once my favorite, and he still stands ace high."

And only jest a few minutes ago a letter was brought to us—drat the dang thing, where did we lay it? But never mind—a letter come in from a feller who says that George Owen Baxter is just about the worst story teller—bar none—that it has ever been his misfortune to run against.

But you don't have to ride far before you come up on some one who thinks Case is *there*. Here is Mrs. Alice Owen, of 1538 Hale Street, Detroit, Michigan, with a boost for him.

"Boss and Folks: Having read your magazine off and on for two years, then having read it steady for two years more, I thought you wouldn't mind my saying a few words.

"I liked 'Windy Rides 'Em Rough'; in fact, I like all stories about Windy and Lonesome. 'That Blasting Maverick' and 'King Cole of Hotrocks' were dandies, too. Hope you will have more like them once in a while. Robert Ormond Case sure put some laughs in those stories.

"You certainly know how to make up a good Western Story Magazine, and if your magazine is as good in the future as has been for the last four years, I'll be completely satisfied. Your magazine takes the place of movies or talkies in our house.

"We liked 'Stormy Dorn,' by Cherry Wilson. Also, 'Fighting for Thoroughbreds, by Raymond A. Berry.

"Well, so long. Best wishes for the future of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE."

"Joe," home town not given, makes a "contrib" as to Tom Starr:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: I have read WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE for quite a long time, and I always come to the Round-up. Right now I wish to horn in on a statement regarding Tom Starr.

"D. W. Allen said at a Round-up, some time ago, that there had been no outlaw in Oklahoma within fifty years by the name of Tom Starr. Maybe not. Still, about thirty years ago, around 1898 or 1899, there was a man killed at or near Hinsdale, Montana, by the name of Tom Dunn. Here is what was told of him after he was dead. They said that he was Ed Starr from Oklahoma, and was a brother of Belle Starr. He had been in trouble in Oklahoma, and had gone north, changing his name to Tom Dunn. He was running a saloon in Saco, Montana, when he was killed by 'Long Henry' Thompson.

"So, Boss, maybe this will start things off on a new trail."

Kind words, these, for Frank Pierce and the rest of us in general. Ernest Maass, Jr., 1341 Prescott Avenue, Monterey, California, sends 'em:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: Here I am again, but with praises this time. The story, 'Timber-r-r!' by Frank Richardson Pierce, to my notion, can't be beat. I hope Frank gives us more like that. He is one of my favorite writers.

"I have been away from the timber for nearly a year, now, but next week I'm going back.

"Another thing, Boss—if you ever get out West here, visit one of the logging camps, or half a dozen, for all that, and look for magazines. You will find five out of six are the good old WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE. Why? Because the stories in it are good. You can even imagine yourself right in the story.

"Will sign off now. Good luck."

From Ottsville, Buck's County, Pennsylvania, Floyd E. Lewis comes with a call for advice:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: I heard the 'Prayer of a Horse' recited in the Round-up, and it sure is a fine thing.

"Do you know how to stop a horse from jerking on his halter rope when feeding time comes? My father fixed a cord through this horse's mouth, and the horse cut his mouth so that I had to cut the cord off. If you have something to suggest, I would sure like to hear it.

"We have three horses, two Southern ones and a bronc. The bronc still bucks when he feels real spry. He also bites, or rather pretends to. He is about eighteen or twenty years old, and the best horse of the three if handled properly. But he has a mind of his own."

Why, Floyd, here is Ben Innis, of Rockford, Illinois, and a better man with a horse has seldom, if ever, slung a leg over one. Ben, what do you suggest as a good thing for Floyd to do to make his horse cut out that monkey business?

"Floyd, your horse has been hit on the head. That is the cause. The remedy is to turn him loose in a box stall, bring in the feed, and call him by name. Talk to him, coax him to you, be patient, and he will soon, without fear, eat out of the pan or pail you hold in your hands. As I understand the case, Floyd, he pulls back on the halter at feeding time only. I know how it all happened. Having a keen appetite, he'd

jammed his bill into the feed box before the feed got into it. For that breach of etiquette he got a club on the head. Actions constitute horse language. A horse never pulls on the halter at feeding time except through fear.

"Now, Floyd, listen to the old Boss himself. Good luck, Floyd, and tell us readers of the WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE how your patience has been rewarded."

That's good advice, Floyd, and you try it out. Is your horse fussy at other times? If you should tie him to a tree, say, would he pull back? If he does, we can fix that for you.

Tie that horse so that he can't break loose. How? Run a rope round his neck and tie it, being sure that the knot won't slip. Then run the rope through a ring—tie ring—of the halter. Now make your horse fast to a tree that is a tree. Soon your horse will start to pull back. It's likely that in his efforts to get loose he'll throw himself—we had a colt do this only last week—and you must stand ready with a sharp knife, lest your horse get snarled up or "cast."

But if he does get tangled up and you have to resort to cutting him loose, don't let your horse get away from you; tie him right up again.

Up jumps another antelope who didn't jump, and which could have been roped by H. B. Schieferstein, 1220 Martin Street, Klamath Falls, Oregon:

"BOSS OF THE ROUND-UP AND FOLKS:

"It happened way back in the summer of 1916, in the Owl Butte region of the Gumbo, about eighteen miles east of the town of Newell, South Dakota. I was riding a flea-bitten gray gelding, known as Snowball, then a horse eight or nine years old; it had been much ridden, was somewhat stove up in front, but was still a fair mount, and crazy to run.

"The country is semidesert, flat to rolling, with no bad draws or gulches in that particular part of it. A homesteader's fence, one quarter of a mile wide and a mile long, stretched before me, from east to west. Approaching the fence from the northwest, I topped a knoll and ran slap bang onto a buck and two does, not over three hundred yards from the fence and just east of the corner. I had often wondered if an antelope would jump a fence, and this, I thought, was a good chance to find out. So, letting out a whoop, I put spurs to old Snowball and took out after Mr. Buck, who was at a little distance from the does.

"He headed east, parallel with the fence, and I after him, perhaps fifty yards to his left, my horse easily keeping pace with him and gradually edging closer in toward him and the fence, until I could not have been over a hundred feet from the fence and just a little ahead of the buck. I, of course, was doing considerable yelling and hat waving in an attempt to turn the buck into the fence, but he continued to run in a direct line. Thus we ran that mile, I within roping distance of him almost all of the last quarter, though I had no intention of roping him, since I wished to see him jump. When we went around the northeast corner of the fence, he passed between me and the fence, through a space not over thirty feet wide; my horse was exactly abreast of him, though the horse was running hard and blowing, while the buck seemed to be loping along fairly easy. After we passed the fence corner, I pulled up and let him go. Perhaps he wasn't really running, maybe he was just out strolling around; but I was within easy roping distance of him, and on an ordinary cow horse.

"I should be glad to hear what Mr. Chastain has to say in regard to this case, as the buck was apparently a good, healthy specimen. Do you suppose he would have put on an extra spurt of speed had I swung a loop?"

Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you. It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

THE Washoe country of Nevada begins in the Long Valley of Nevada's northwest and stretches southward through Buffalo Meadows, and Deep Hole, and through Smoke Creek Desert, and southward of Pyramid Lake.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: My dad is an old cowboy. He's been vaquero boss of one of the outfits here for twenty-five years. And my great-granddad was an old-timer who lived in Colorado when there was only one log cabin in Denver. And great-granddad and his son, my granddad owned the biggest "shack" in Cripple Creek back in the gold-rush days when the Cripple Creek cow country became the stomping ground of miners.

Great-granddad came to California in 1912 to live with my granddad. Yes, we live in California, folks, but only thirteen miles from the good old Nevada line; and it is only a short jaunt by horseback from our own Modoc country to the Washoe country of northwestern Nevada. I love to go over the line. I like the Long Valley country and the Smoke Creek Desert, and I have been down in the Washoe country as far as Pyramid Lake.

The Washoe country is a little strip that runs for about a hundred and fifty miles along the border, starting up at Long Valley and running right along the line down as far as Reno. From east to west the Washoe country is only a very narrow strip of about twenty-five to thirty miles, but it is a fine country for anybody who likes to ride horseback; and if you like to run wild horses it sure is great. I'm only sixteen, but I have ridden a horse ever since I have been old enough to stay in the saddle. I don't mean to say that I can ride bucking horses, but I sure can ride good enough to run wild horses. And as it is only about forty-four miles from my home to the country where there are hundreds of wild horses, I have lots of fun running them. You-all have seen deer, I guess? Well, these wild horses are like deer when it comes to speed. They just skim over the ground by leaps and bounds. Some people shoot wild horses every year. Yes, I have a big rifle, too, just like other folks. I've hunted just about everything there is to hunt, and I've fished in Pyramid Lake. I'll be glad to tell more about this country if anybody wants to write.

MODOC MISS.

Care of The Tree.

Range sheep.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I want to know all about sheep. Will you old Western herders and you young sheep-herders get together, folks, and help me out? I want to gather together a complete mass of information on range sheep. I hope to hear from sheepmen in all parts of the country from Guadelajara to the Canadian line. I'd like to know how

sheep are handled on the range and in the corral—winter, spring, summer, and fall. And if possible, folks, I'd like some snaps of herds on the range, of lambing pens and range camps, and of the home corrals. Or if you old-timers have no snaps, some rough sketches would sure be appreciated. This is a large order, folks, and if you cannot fill it all, do your bit and I will surely thank you. If any of you old-timers have had trouble with the encroachment of cattle on your range, I wish you'd tell me about it, and your opinion of cattlemen in general, and some in particular.

I'm living in El Paso, Texas, where seventy-five per cent of the language spoken is Spanish. I'll be glad to tell you-all what you might want to know about life on the border of Mexico. I have traveled all over the Western half of this country of ours, and I'll welcome an exchange of opinions.

Well, folks, here's hoping I get a lot of information on "woollies."

HOWARD C. POND.

913 North Stanton Street, El Paso, Texas.

In the south of Wyoming.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: We are a couple of hombres who have a little mine of our own down here in Wyoming. We are six miles out of town. We work hard here, folks, but still there is plenty of time to get lonesome, and we'd like a bushel or two of letters from folks who just naturally like the outdoor life. We'd like to hear from folks interested in ranch life, as we generally follow that kind of work.

HOWARD TROGDON AND BERNARD MILLER.

Box 342, McFadden, Wyoming.

West Texas cowboy.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Nope, this isn't the Texas Panhandle—this is way over west and just under New Mexico. In fact, we're over so far in Texas that we're wedged in between New Mexico and the old border line of Mexico. Frijole is on the trail that leads to Carlsbad, New Mexico, and is at the top of old Culberson County; and Loco is along down south a piece and only a short *pasear* from the Mexican border. And the X Ranch, folks, just naturally rambles between these two points, over eastward. X Ranch has about four hundred thousand acres of grazing land, about thirty miles from the railroad. Yep, we are a fair-sized outfit, and big enough to carry a chuck wagon when we are working the range. In the winter, though, we boys keep our own bunk houses and do our own "batching." Yep, I'm one of the boys—cowboy boss!

Well, folks, if you-all want to hear about this big country down here, just let your letters take a little *pasear* down this here way.

X RANCH WADDY.

Care of The Tree.

It is a fine trek by horseback through the Washoe country of northwestern Nevada. Long Valley sweeps southward toward Buffalo Meadows, and Deep Hole and Smoke Creek Desert catch up with you as you take the *pasear* southward to Pyramid Lake and Reno. Wear your friend-maker badges, folks, and join the trekkers of the Washoe country.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to the Hollow Tree Department, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City, will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

Devil's Garden country.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: We are trappers, my husband and I, and last winter we trapped in the Devil's Garden country up in northern California, near the Oregon line. Oh, yes, there's plenty of snow here in winter, and the trap line pays well.

We have two little adopted boys, one seven and one nine, and we would like to find a little sister, too, if there is one somewhere who needs a mother's care. Yes, we are proud of our little family, and want a little sister very much. We will welcome letters from the married folks of the old Holla.

MRS. WILLIAM ROYCE.

Box 551, Alturas, California.

Canadian Northwest.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: My home stomping ground is the British Columbia country, folks, but at present I am in southern Alberta, on my uncle's ranch. I know my home stomping ground and its neighbor, Alberta, so well, folks, that I can take all short-cuts across country from the ocean to the border between

Alberta and Saskatchewan. Yes, indeed, I am fond of horseback riding, and this country knows me well. My age? Well, I'm not so old, folks—just eighteen.

DOLORES A. MILOSIK.
Box 140, Wayne, Alberta, Canada.

The Tanana and Matanuska country.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I'm hoping to corral a few of the sour doughs of the Alaskan Northwest. I'm looking for information about that Far North country, and would like very much to get in touch with some of the old sour doughs of the Matanuska or Tanana Valleys. FRED L. HAWORTH.
Box 24, Marshall, Oklahoma.

"My husband and I want to go West this spring, and we would like the Gang to help us to find a good location. We are both young—my husband is twenty-five and I am nineteen. We would like to locate on a ranch if possible." These folks are Mr. and Mrs. Richard Chetter, Route 2, Kearney, Missouri.

Ted S. Stafford, 12 Genesee Street, Geneva, New York, would like to hear from his old buddies who served in the mounted service at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, in 1891.

"Folks, I have traveled America from coast to coast, and I like the New England States and California more than any others, except, perhaps, Colorado. Colorado is indeed very beautiful. I love the outdoor life—hunting, fishing, hiking, and swimming. I've traveled in England, France, Scotland, Ireland, and Canada. England is my birthplace, folks. But maybe you-all would rather have me tell you something about the world's largest joshua tree, and about Red Rock Canyon, both of which are within twenty-five miles of my town, folks. I am a young married woman and hope to hear from other young married folks of the Gang. I'll acknowledge all letters received—yes, that is a promise, folks. Just address me as Mrs. C. P., in care of The Tree."

I'm a new member of the old Holla—eighteen years old, folks. I was born in Maine and lived there for fourteen years. I know Maine from one end to the other and back again. I'm interested in hunting and trapping and would like to hear from trappers in Maine, Canada, or any other part of the country. Would like to hear from forest rangers, too." This hombre is Richard E. Fairbrother, 44 B Street, South Boston, Massachusetts.

"Just a widow lady of Illinois, folks, who is lonesome and would like to hear from folks who live in the Southwest. I would like to know something about the price of land in the Southwest, and also something about the climate and the soil. I would especially welcome letters from folks between thirty-five and sixty, and from folks who will tell me straight-from-the-shoulder facts about the Southwest." Address this Sister Gangster as Mary E., in care of The Tree.

"I would like to hear from some of the rough riders of the range. I'm seventeen, and am considered a good shot with most any kind of a gun. I've never been farther West than Dakota, but sure would like to hit the trail to the real West. Get your pens, folks, and let's hear from you," says Walter Keil. The address is Route 3, Bellevue, Iowa.

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

by John North

It is our aim in this department to be of genuine practical help and service to those who wish to make use of it. Don't hesitate to write to us and give us the opportunity of assisting you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

EACH one of our readers seems to have his own pet part of the West, and every time we give advice about any particular spot there is a whole bagful of letters offering a rival locality for consideration. For instance, not so long ago D. O. P., of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, made some queries about the Okanogan Country out in Washington, and we answered them to the best of our ability. Now here comes J. A. H., of Bellingham, Washington, who is volunteering information about another part of the Northwest which he considers a better bet for the prospective settler.

"My father and his folks come from D. O. P.'s State, Mr. North, and so I am Pennsylvania Dutch, although being Western-born, I have never been in the Keystone State. I notice in a recent issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, of which I am a constant reader, that D. O. P. was referred to the Okanogan country as a likely place for hunting and fishing, and for a location where he could earn a living while he enjoyed these sports. Now I know a good deal about this Northwestern country and have driven to California four times. I have also trekked in my automobile through Idaho, Oregon, Utah, Colorado to Nebraska, and South Dakota, and Wyoming.

"I'd like to give D. O. P. a tip. The Okanogan country is good in spots, but I'd suggest that he look over the Big Bend country, which is about eighty miles east of Eugene, Oregon. If he is driving west, he should head for Eugene and from there he will have a good road into Bend. In my opinion this is a portion of the country that is coming to the front and is full of opportunities for a man, whether he is young, middle-aged, or older. There is wonderful timber. Hunting is excellent, and as for the fishing it is so fine that it gets to be monotonous taking 'em off the hook."

We always welcome letters from readers describing spots with which they are familiar. Because we think these first-hand tips are interesting to all our readers we are going to publish

another one, which has been sent to H. K. D., of Chicago, Illinois, who made some inquiries in the department about Woodburn, Oregon.

"As I spent two years in Corvallis, south of Woodburn, Oregon, Mr. North," writes C. B. R., of Girard, Ohio, "I would like to make a suggestion or two which I think might prove helpful to H. K. D. I would advise this hombre after getting settled to attend the Oregon State Agricultural College summer course, choosing any branch of agriculture in which he wishes to specialize. This can be done for a small sum of money. The course lasts six weeks and about all it costs is board and books. H. K. D. can write to the Registrar of the Oregon State Agricultural College, Corvallis, Oregon, for information.

"I spent a year there in 1921, registering in poultry husbandry. This college also has a farmer's week which costs only one dollar plus board.

"I'd like also to warn H. K. D. to be careful of real-estate sharks. They do like to get hold of an Easterner, and I have seen the results of it around Portland. When H. K. D. has selected his place, I would advise him to make inquiries of his neighbor farmers before closing the deal. One can't be too careful. Please don't think, Mr. North, that I am trying to discourage H. K. D. I just want to warn him to be on his guard. I would go back there to-morrow if it were not for family ties.

"No doubt H. K. D. will get lonesome to see some snow. Well, he will, but not for long. It soon melts. He will miss the trees that we have in the East, too, and I mean really yearn for them. Most of the trees out there are evergreens, scrub oak, or fruit trees. They say the climate is fine for nervousness. Well, I don't know about that, but I got fat and healthy out there. It's a great country, anywhere from Eugene, Oregon, up to Seattle, Washington."

And a great country also is the Salt River Irrigation Project out in Arizona, about which Jerry G., of Providence, Rhode Island, is making inquiries. "I've been ordered to the Southwest for my health, Mr. North," writes this citizen of Little Rhody, "and have heard that Phoenix and its vicinity has a fine climate. I'm thinking of locating somewhere on the Salt River Project, and would like information about that section as to location, climate, et cetera.

"Is live stock an important industry out that way? How about dairying? Are transportation facilities good? Can you tell me anything about towns on the project? In addition to all these questions I'd like to know about schools, as I have two small boys to educate."

We are mighty glad to pass on to Jerry all we know about this project of Uncle Sam's. It is located in the south central part of Arizona on both sides of Salt River, in the vicinity of Phoenix. The climate is semitropical and ranges in temperature from twenty degrees to 117 degrees. The elevation of the project averages about 1200 feet above sea level.

Jerry probably knows that the engineering feature upon which this project depends for its existence is the Roosevelt Dam. Other features are Granite Reef Dam and Joint Head Dam, where water is diverted into a canal and lateral system 863 miles in extent. The water supply is furnished by the Salt and Verde Rivers and from deep wells within the project area. The irrigable area of the project is 213,170 acres. The topography is smooth, with gentle slopes for irrigation, and the soils range from a sandy loam to a clay loam and are very fertile and easily worked.

The long growing season favors a large variety of crops, which include citrus fruits, winter vegetables, head lettuce, cantaloupes, cotton, corn, small grains, and alfalfa. Cotton and alfalfa are the leading crops.

Yes, indeed, live stock is a prime industry in the valley on account of the mild winter and outside range. Hogs and sheep do well on alfalfa and are finished with grain. Dairying is an important industry because of the abundance of feed produced. The range districts adjacent to the project are better suited to winter than to summer pasture on account of the dry summer season and scarcity of stock water. The mountainous districts to the east and north, however, furnish feeding grounds for large herds of sheep and cattle during the summer months.

Jerry will find many cotton gins and one cotton press on the project. Packing houses for fruit and vegetables, creameries, and milk condenseries are provided at convenient locations. Transportation facilities are excellent, as the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe and the Arizona Eastern Railroad run through the project. The valley is traversed by an extensive network of concrete highways and no farm is more than two miles distant from a pavement. Forage plants and grains usually find a market at home or within the State, but cotton, fruit, and vegetables are marketed in the large cities of the South and East.

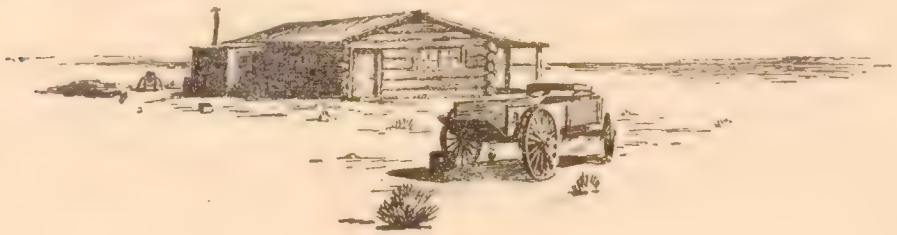
There are fourteen towns within the project limits, which include Phoenix, Mesa, Tempe, Chandler, and Glendale, with a combined population of about 40,000. The principal city is Phoenix, which has a population of about 30,000. The total population of the project is about 75,000 to 80,000. Sixty modern public schools furnish educational advantages to residents. And for summer outings and vacations Prescott and Flagstaff, situated in the beautiful mountains to the north, make mighty fine resorts.

Speaking of vacations reminds me of the request of Rex G., of New York City. "I'm looking for a Western ranch where the business man of limited means can have an outdoor outing at moderate cost, Mr. North," writes this hombre. "I've heard that the Spear X Ranch out in Wyoming fills the bill. Can you tell me anything of this outfit? Understand, I'm not looking for a resort, but an honest-to-goodness cattle ranch. If it's not too much trouble I'd like the names of some other outfits in that part of the West."

From all the reports that have drifted our way, we'd opine that the Spear X might suit Rex to a T, for this ranch is said to offer comfortable accommodations at a moderate cost. It is situated 42 miles from Arvada and 56 miles from Gillette, Wyoming, on the Montana-Wyoming State line, among the hills of the Powder River, a stream closely connected with the days when that part of the West was Indian country, filled with redskins, adventurers, buffalo herds, and cowboys.

As for the latter, Rex will find plenty of 'em at the Spear X, for this outfit is a real operating cattle ranch, where they round up and brand cattle and "bust 'em out," as he'll see for himself when he gets there.

We are sending Rex a list of other ranches out in the Big Horn Mountains, and will be glad to forward the same names and addresses to any other hombres who are interested.



MISSING

This department conducted in duplicate in DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE and WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, thus giving readers double service, is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send us a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all communications to Missing Department, WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

NUNN, JAMES A.—Your son, William, is at the Philadelphia General Hospital, critically ill. Please write to Wife, care of this magazine.

BACH, PETER.—Please forgive me. You can get my address from sister. Write to Wife, care of this magazine.

SCRANTON, FISHER EUGENE.—Twenty-six years old. Last heard from in Nevada. Please write to your aunt, Katharine Autery, 617 Hollister Street, San Fernando, California.

MILLERS, RAYMOND, RAY, WINNIE, and **WAYNE.**—Lost your address. Please write to Mrs. Viola Watson, 2004 South Oak Street, Burbank, California.

MAIL, JOHN and **EMMA.**—Parents of Willie Mail, who was left in an orphanage, at Portland, Oregon, about twenty-two years ago. He was adopted by Mrs. Frean, of Freewater, Oregon. Information appreciated by Mrs. V., care of this magazine.

GERIN, or **LaJOIE, PAUL VICTOR EDMUND.**—Last heard from in 1913. Served as marine in several enlistments. Last enlistment was at Fort Wadsworth, in 1904. Please write to D., care of this magazine.

PHYSICIAN, TOM.—Please write to Steve Fredison, 901 McIntosh Street, Fort William, Ontario, Canada.

MacDONALD, ALLAN J.—Father is very sick. Please write at once to Cassie, care of this magazine.

MOMPHER, DONALD.—Twenty-one years old. Five feet seven inches tall, light-brown curly hair, and fair complexion. Have interesting news for him. Information appreciated by his sister, Inez Mompher, 235 Findlay Street, Fostoria, Ohio.

MONTGOMERY, WILLY.—Fifty-four years old. Last heard from in Coffeyville, Kansas, twenty-three years ago. Information appreciated by his sister, Mrs. Ada Parmer, 418 North Treece Street, Picher, Oklahoma.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from members of the First Battalion, Sixth Engineers, who were stationed at Camp Lewis, Washington, in 1921 or 1922. Address Murphy F. Steen, Box 94, Tallahassee, Florida.

SAWYER, WALLACE.—Twenty-seven years old. Six feet tall, dark-brown wavy hair, blue eyes. Left Spartanburg, South Carolina, in July, 1928. Believed to be in Virginia. Information appreciated by M. J. Sawyer, 382 Farley Street, Spartanburg, South Carolina.

KOLL, MACK M.—Left home November 23, 1929. Thirty-six years old. Five feet eight inches tall, brown eyes, and dark hair. Please come back or write to Margaret, care of S. A. Gatzemeyer, Nacora, Nebraska.

CARTER, J. T.—Fifty-eight years old. Five feet six inches tall, blue eyes, fair complexion, and weighs about one hundred and sixty pounds. Last heard from in Van Buren, Arkansas. Information appreciated by Mrs. Willie Mae Adams, New Bloomfield, Missouri.

JOHNSTONE, MRS. W. J., nee **VIOLET MAY FRIEND.**—Last seen in 1911 at Bellville, Ontario, Canada. Believed to have married, and lived for some time at Sunnybrook Farm, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Her father is dead, and her mother has married again. Would like to hear from her. Information appreciated by Mother, care of this magazine.

GOODMAN, WILLIAM E.—Have important news for him. Was in California in 1925 and 1926. Information appreciated by J. B., care of this magazine.

EWIN, HOWARD W.—Information appreciated by Dana M. Ewin, Box 271, Station A, Columbus, Ohio.

TORANCE, JACK.—We still love you. Betty and Children, same address or care of this magazine.

GORDON.—We are expecting you home after April 15th. Don't disappoint us. Please write to Mother, same address or care of this magazine.

EVANS, DEE.—Believed to be in Oklahoma or Texas. Remember the girl at Buster's and Ruth's, in Oregon? Information appreciated by M. W., care of this magazine.

LAWS, ELDORA.—Please write to Voylette Hicks, 2629 Lincoln Avenue, Miami, Florida.

FISH, CHARLES W.—Thirty years old. Was with the Fifteenth Infantry, stationed at Tientsin, China, in 1926. Information appreciated by P. W. Fish, 69 Seneca Street, Hornell, New York.

NOTICE.—On August 16, 1902, a baby girl with dark hair and eyes was left at 1009 Jackson Street, Peoria, Illinois. There was some money left in the basket with the baby, who was about three months old. She is now looking for her people. Information appreciated by Mrs. Viola Gradall, R. F. D. 1, Hopewell, Kansas.

SPRODLIN, BENNIE.—Twenty-one years old. His parents separated when he was four years old. They were Harry and Lola Sprodlin. There were two other children, Buryel and Birt. Their mother later married Ed Collins. Alice Carter and her husband adopted Bennie. Mr. Carter was later killed. Alice Carter took Bennie out West, and he has not been heard of since. Information appreciated by his sister, Mrs. Dewey Solyers, Stirrat, West Virginia.

PARENT, PETE.—Last seen in St. Louis, Missouri. Information appreciated by B. H. Squires, care of Post Headquarters, Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri.

DALZIEL, LEON J.—Information appreciated by Cecil Dalziel, Ripley Barber Shop, Mewton, Kansas.

RICE, CHARLES VAN.—Twenty-eight years old. Light hair, blue eyes, fair complexion, five feet eight inches tall, and weighed about one hundred and fifty pounds. Worked for some time in Redding, California. Last heard from in Reno, Nevada, in the fall of 1928. Please write to mamma, R. E. T., same address or care of this magazine.

WHYNN, WILLIAM A.—At one time lived at 5 Just Right Place, Scranton, Pennsylvania. Last heard from in Pittston, Pennsylvania. Believed to be in New Jersey. Information appreciated by Dolly, care of this magazine.

POLLOCK, JACK and **RAYMOND.**—Sons of Maxwell and Jessie Pollock. Have lived in Arizona and California. Father is believed to be buried at San Mateo, California. Information appreciated by their aunt, Mrs. Florence Bennett, 1101 West Eighty-ninth Street, Los Angeles, California.

WILLIAMS, JACK.—Forty years old. Five feet eight inches tall, light-brown hair, and light complexion. Weighed about one hundred and fifty-eight pounds. Has a rose and "Mother" tattooed on left arm. Two hearts and "Elma" tattooed on right arm. I still love you. Please come back or write to Elma Stevenson, Box 103, Wildrose, North Dakota.

MILLER, NELLIE.—Last heard from in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1928. Information appreciated by her sister, Mrs. Louis Restoria, Box 457, Northfork, West Virginia.

McREA, WARD BILL.—Nineteen years old. Five feet eight inches tall, dark-brown hair, blue eyes, and weighs about one hundred and thirty pounds. Worked for the National White Lead Co., of New York City. Left home February 14, 1930. Willa and I want to know where you are. Please write to Sandie Heller, 847 Boulevard East, Weehawken, New Jersey.

FISHER, THOMAS HENDRIX.—Formerly of Bradwell, Kentucky. Last heard from in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1921. Believed to be in Chicago, Illinois. I can't forget and would like to explain. Please write to Alma Wilson Crawford, 3291 Summer Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee.

SHORES, VARO PHILIP.—I used to live near Adams, Nebraska. Would like to hear from you. Please write to your old friend, Lula S., care of this magazine.

MILLER, CRIST.—Fifty years old. Left Akron, Ohio, and went to Canada. A native of Bulgaria. Information appreciated by an old pal, William Meargard, Smithton, Pennsylvania.

SCHILDTKNECHT, MILTON G.—Forty years old. Five feet eight inches tall and has dark hair. Last heard from in Manteca, California, in 1916. Information appreciated by his sister, Rosa V. Kline, Smithsburg, Maryland.

CLARK, ARTHUR RUSSELL.—Twenty-three years old. Last seen in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1922. Mother and father are both dead. Information appreciated by his sister, Annabelle Clark Rutherford, 11170 Franklin Street, Lynwood, California.

OREAR, ERNEST.—Short and light complexion. Information appreciated by Mrs. George W. Schale, Morenci, Arizona.

BRODERICK, SHORTY.—Five feet four inches tall, weighs about one hundred and forty-five pounds, brown hair, and light-brown eyes. Information appreciated by A. E. Broderick, Sacred Heart Hospital, St. Ignatius, Montana.

GRASSELL, GEORGE.—Of California. Last seen in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Please write to your old friend, Pearl Gibson, Route 11, Box 132, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

CREEK, ROBERT W.—Sixty-two years old. Left Douds, Iowa, forty-one years ago. Last heard of about twelve years ago. Information appreciated by his sister, Mrs. Alice Viola Duke, Route 1, Birmingham, Iowa.

TONKRY, or PENIX, W. S.—About sixty years old. Five feet tall, light hair, fair complexion, blue eyes, and weighed about one hundred pounds. Last heard from in Alabama. Information appreciated by his daughter, Belle Penix, 824 Hamilton Street, Johnson City, Tennessee.

GIBSON, OLIVER.—Married Estelle Robison, who died in Macon, Georgia. Lived in Fitzgerald, Georgia, in 1911. Information appreciated by Mrs. A. J. Jones, Route 2, Box 403, Little River Station, Miami, Florida.

PALMORE, ALFRED.—Five feet tall, dark complexion. Last heard from in Washington, D. C., about six years ago. Limps slightly. Information appreciated by his wife, Jessie Palmore, 1136 Seventh Avenue, Huntington, West Virginia.

SCOTT, KITTY, nee **BOSLEY.**—Last heard from in Roanoke, Virginia, in 1928. Information appreciated by M. G. B., 673 Ontario Street, Buffalo, New York.

PAYNE, HOWARD.—Nineteen years old. Tall, black hair, weighs about one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Last heard from in Plaza, North Dakota. Please write to Bill G., same address or care of this magazine.

CONN, ROBERT ORVILLE.—Forty-two years old. Do you remember a small town in Minnesota, in the fall of 1918? Please write to Clara, care of this magazine.

KEARNS, MAY.—Please write to Bill Kearns, Route 1, Georgetown, Ohio.

LEE, SALLY.—Last heard from in Umatilla, Florida. Please write to Earl H. Blanchard, Box 115, Lake Jem, Florida.

PHELPS, WILLIAM LEE.—Five feet nine inches tall, ruddy complexion, gray eyes, dark-brown hair turning gray. Was stationed at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, until March, 1929. Left home, at 118 Highwood Avenue, Highwood, Illinois, on May 20, 1929, and has not been heard from since. Information appreciated by his wife, Mrs. William Phelps, care of this magazine

FRENCHY.—Remember C Street, in 1928? I know now what you wished to talk of. Please forgive and write to G., care of this magazine.

GILLOCK, EUGENE.—Forty-three years old. Six feet tall, dark-brown hair, and weighs about one hundred and ninety pounds. Last heard from in Wink, Texas. Believed to be in New Mexico. Information appreciated by his sister, Mrs. Ike Powell, Route 3, DeLeon, Texas.

BOWDEN, JOEL; HAMILTON, BILL; and **ECHOLS, HOMER.**—Were working at Bowden's sawmill, in Fouke, Arkansas, in November, 1929. Please write to M. D., care of this magazine.

CAMERON, W. X.—B. told me you didn't care any longer. I couldn't come after that. I love you and always will. Please write to M. X. Cameron, care of this magazine.

RYALS, CHARLES E.—Attended the Louis College of Dentistry, in 1911 and 1912. Last heard from in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1916. Information appreciated by Box 134, Welcetka, Oklahoma.

BOYD, MRS. EMMA D.—Of Louisville, Kentucky. Last heard from in 1926. Information appreciated by Box 134, Welcetka, Oklahoma.

HAND, RUPERT.—Tall, blond hair, and gray eyes. Last seen in October, 1928. Information appreciated by A. Rodi, care of this magazine.

WASHBURN, WILLIAM.—Lived in Norwood, Rhode Island, in 1917. Information appreciated by Friend, care of this magazine.

TUCKER, SAM, and family.—Last address in March, 1899, was care of Tucker Produce Co., 48 Woodbridge Street, Detroit, Michigan. Information appreciated by Myra Tucker Smyth, 5 A Street, Whitinsville, Massachusetts.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from members of Company M, Second Texas Infantry, in the Spanish-American War. Information appreciated by William V. Goforth, 1521 Marshall Street, Little Rock, Arkansas.

BRAMAN, CATHERINE.—Let's forget the past and start again. I mean it more than ever now. Please write to Hodgy, care of this magazine.

NOTICE.—I have a half brother, whose first name is Edward. He is about twenty years old. His mother's name was Ida and she died in July or August, 1929. I believe. I do not know the last name. In the summer of 1929 Edward was working near Superior, Wisconsin. Information appreciated by Martha McDonald, care of this magazine.

GUY, RAYMOND EDGAR.—Have important information for you. Please come home at once or write to Pal, care of this magazine.

ALLEN, WILLIAM J.—Have tried so hard to find you. Please write to M. M. A., care of this magazine.

KING, ERNEST R.—Why did you leave? Please write to A. M., Salado, Texas.

REYNOLDS, WILLIAM.—Twenty-seven years old. Five feet five inches tall and blond. Left Sydney, Australia, in 1928, for America. Information appreciated by his wife, Sadie Reynolds, Queen Street, Stockton, via Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia.

KELTON or CALTON.—Would like to hear from two uncles, brothers of James Kelton and the sons of John Kelton. My uncles are Robert Kelton, born at Kirkmarden, Scotland, October 26, 1838, and Alexander Kelton, born at Port Elizabeth, Africa, April 15, 1846. Would like to hear from them or their descendants. Information appreciated by Agnes Kelton Wedge, 2 Provincial Street, Auburn, New South Wales, Australia.

SMITS, FRED.—Twenty-four years old. Brown hair and blue eyes Information appreciated by his sister, Mrs. Louise Cornwell, Route 2, Box 122, Santa Ana, California.

HEALEY, ROY L.—Last heard from in Clearfield, Pennsylvania. Information appreciated by Cy Mann, Box 1091, Baytown, Texas.

The consular office of a foreign government, situated in New York, is trying to get in touch with the following people for various reasons: CHAPMAN, JOSEPH.—Native of Belfast, Ireland; last heard of at 2137 Madison Avenue, New York, New York. **HAMBLIN, TREVOR COLIN.**—Last heard from in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, in February, 1928. **KENNEAR, A. E.**—Recently in Texas and Illinois; believed to be in Brooklyn, New York. **ENGINEER LIEUTENANT COMMANDER W. LONG.**—Native of Scotland; connected in 1925 with the barge "Harold A. Cobb." **BAPTISTA, LIONEL J.**—Native of Trinidad; recently of 2144 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York. **FRANCE, ALFRED.**—Native of Demerara; last heard from at 464 Stone Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. **ALEXANDER, GEORGE C.**—Native of Barbados; was employed by the Hudson Navigation Co., New York, New York. **DANIEL, AGNES,** nee **HOSPIDALEZ.**—Recently of 48 West One Hundred and Eighth Street, New York, New York. **DEVONSHIRE, CHARLES ALFRED.**—Native of London, England; a gardener; recently in Detroit, Michigan. **ROSTRON, ROBERT HENRY.**—Sometimes known as Bob Loyner; native of England; about thirty-six years old, five feet six inches tall, very dark hair; formerly employed by the American Printing Co., Fall River, Massachusetts. **VINCENT, JOHN.**—Otherwise known as Jonah Vincent; English; came to the United States in 1888; had two daughters, Ethel and Beatrice; was employed for many years as guard on railway; resided at one time at 15 Grant Avenue, Albany, New York. **O'CONNOR, OLIVER.**—Native of Liverpool, England; thirty-four years old; five feet eight inches tall, dark-brown hair, clean shaven, light-blue eyes; employed in 1920 on the S. S. "Socrates," and recently on the S. S. "Raphael." **PERLEBERG, MRS. YVONNE J.**—Recently of 14 East Thirty-seventh Street, New York, New York. **HAYTON, JOHN IVISION.**—Native of Great Britain; now in New York. **MacLEOD, WILLIAM.**—Native of Inverness, Scotland; last known address was 2199A Pacific Street, Brooklyn, New York. **HARRINGAN, MRS. J.**—Last known address was 1167 Second Avenue, New York, New York. **EDLIN, ERNEST SAMUEL.**—Native of Leicester; came to the United States in 1910; in 1928 was employed as baggageman with the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad Co., and also with W. S. Sweet & Son, 89 Canal Street, Providence, Rhode Island; at that time was living on River Avenue, Norwood, Rhode Island. **FINDLEY, PETER.**—Native of Kilwirming, Scotland; recently of 167 Eleventh Street, Hoboken, New Jersey. **LEWIN, FERDINAND MARTIN.**—Native of Brighton, England; last address was, in 1927, 240 South Ninth Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; a watch and clock maker. **CASE, MRS. FRANK R.**—Native of England; married an American soldier; last address was 343 West Ninety-sixth Street, New York, New York.

Information concerning the present address of any of the above should be addressed to Box 2, Station P, New York City.

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